BACCANO!

1934 Peter Pan in Chains: Finale



RYOHGO NARITA

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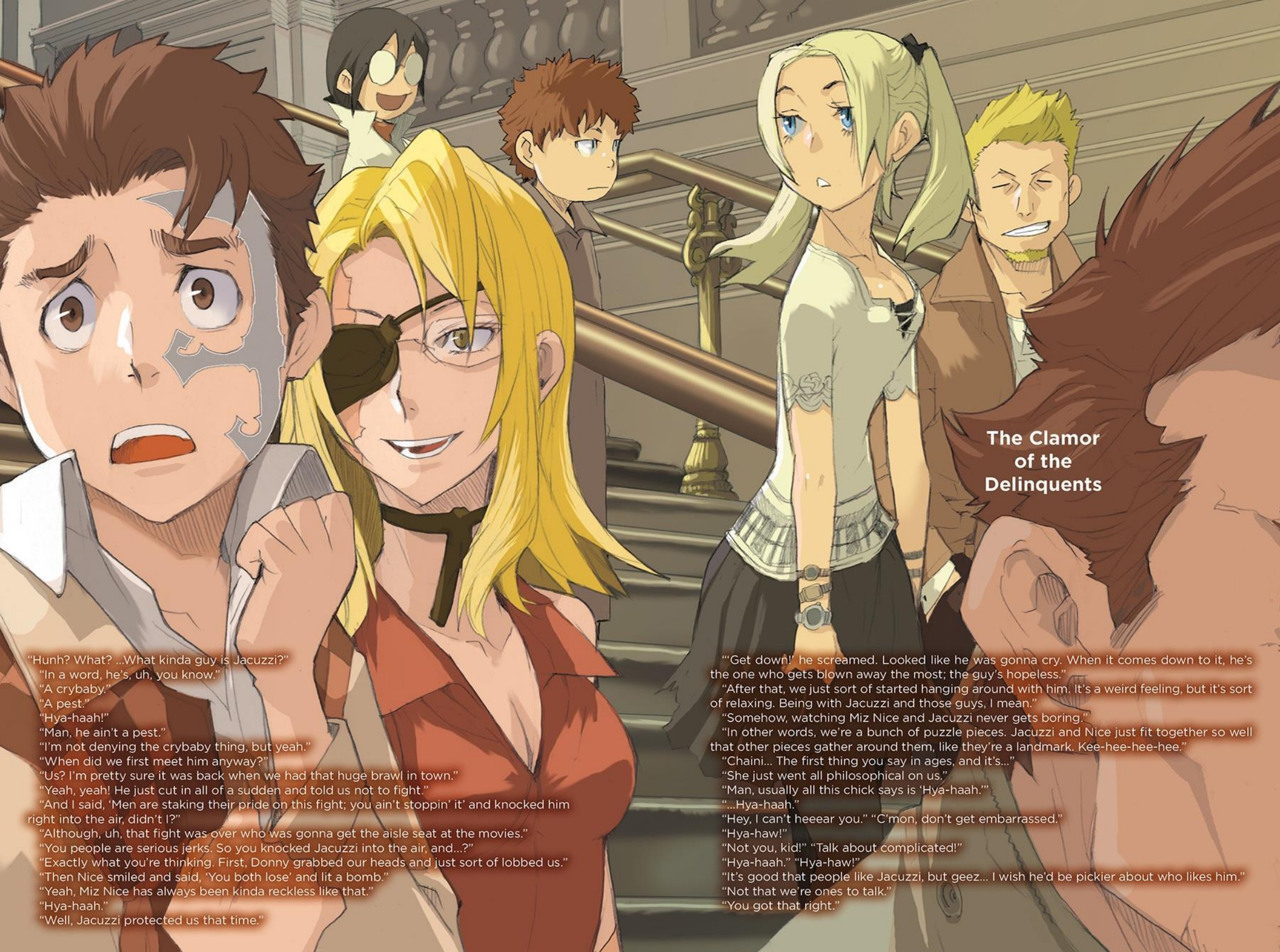




BACCANO!

1934 Peter Pan in Chains: Finale

RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI



The Clamor of the Delinquents

"Hunh? What? ...What kinda guy is Jacuzzi?"
"In a word, he's, uh, you know."
"A crybaby."
"A pest."
"Hya-haah!"
"Man, he ain't a pest."
"I'm not denying the crybaby thing, but yeah."
"When did we first meet him anyway?"
"Us? I'm pretty sure it was back when we had that huge brawl in town."
"Yeah, yeah! He just cut in all of a sudden and told us not to fight."
"And I said, 'Men are staking their pride on this fight; you ain't stoppin' it' and knocked him right into the air, didn't I?"
"Although, uh, that fight was over who was gonna get the aisle seat at the movies."
"You people are serious jerks. So you knocked Jacuzzi into the air, and...?"
"Exactly what you're thinking. First, Donny grabbed our heads and just sort of lobbed us."
"Then Nice smiled and said, 'You both lose' and lit a bomb."
"Yeah, Miz Nice has always been kinda reckless like that."
"Hya-haah."
"Well, Jacuzzi protected us that time."

"'Get down!' he screamed. Looked like he was gonna cry. When it comes down to it, he's the one who gets blown away the most; the guy's hopeless."
"After that, we just sort of started hanging around with him. It's a weird feeling, but it's sort of relaxing. Being with Jacuzzi and those guys, I mean."
"Somehow, watching Miz Nice and Jacuzzi never gets boring."
"In other words, we're a bunch of puzzle pieces. Jacuzzi and Nice just fit together so well that other pieces gather around them, like they're a landmark. Kee-hee-hee-hee."
"Chaini... The first thing you say in ages, and it's..."
"She just went all philosophical on us."
"Man, usually all this chick says is 'Hya-haah.'"
"...Hya-haah."
"Hey, I can't heeear you." "C'mon, don't get embarrassed."
"Hya-haw!"
"Not you, kid!" "Talk about complicated!"
"Hya-haah." "Hya-haw!"
"It's good that people like Jacuzzi, but geez... I wish he'd be pickier about who likes him."
"Not that we're ones to talk."
"You got that right."



These people really are out of their minds.

Chris and Graham and that lady Sickle. They're completely insane.

Their little death match here does nothing for anyone.

Well, maybe it does something for Chris and Graham. They both look like they're having a whole lot of fun.

How should I say this? Um...

I'm a little...just a tiny smidgen...jealous.

I haven't smiled like that in years. I'm not sure I've ever enjoyed myself like that in my life. When Mom and Dad died, I had a hard time accepting reality. I get the feeling I didn't cry and carry on.

Chris calls himself unnatural, but I'm sure I'm much less "natural" for a human.

If there's one other point of envy...

...it's really frustrating, but I've never seen Christopher so alive when he's with me.

A little while ago, when we were killing time by helping Miss Lua put together a jigsaw puzzle, he said something to me:

"If this world is a puzzle, then I must be a true square. I'm not linked to anything. If you wanted to put it together, all you'd have is me. A one-piece puzzle. How delightful. That makes me happy."

I didn't understand what he meant, but now that I'm watching him run around like a kid in a candy store—albeit one sweaty with fear—it makes me think.

I bet Graham and that lady are square pieces, just like Chris.

That's why, that's exactly why— True squares fit together so perfectly, it's almost frightening. They come apart with ease, but if you put them together in a frame, I think they'd make a very, very pretty picture.

If possible, I'd like to join...

No, I won't go there.

Right now, I'll just do what I can.

The first order of business is...figuring out how to stop this fight.

How to kick this ridiculous jigsaw puzzle across the room. That's all.

Like how I want to kick this whole world into pieces.

I want to make a show of it, to feel great doing it—and to wear an expression like those three have...



A Conversation Between Inmates

"My girl likes jigsaw puzzles, see."

"Huh. Well, there's nothing wrong with that."

"Her favorite kind is one of those pure-white jigsaws. She just puts it together piece by piece, hundreds of 'em, working by shape alone. Then, when it's all done, she draws a picture on the white board. Sometimes it's a landscape, or a self-portrait, or something that don't make much sense at all."

"I see. Seems like a white jigsaw puzzle would be a real headache, but if she's doing it so she can draw pictures, I kinda get where she's coming from."

"Yeah, see? And then, when the picture's finished, she takes it to pieces with this blissful smile. She looks so lonely. It's fantastic; makes me want to put my hands around her neck."

"...Sounds like she's definitely the girl for you."

"Yeah, just what you'd expect, right?"

"..."

"What's the matter?"

"...Uh... Eh, never mind. My girl and my pals go nuts setting up dominos. They make these beautiful designs like you wouldn't believe, and the second they finish, they knock 'em right over. I dunno why they bother."

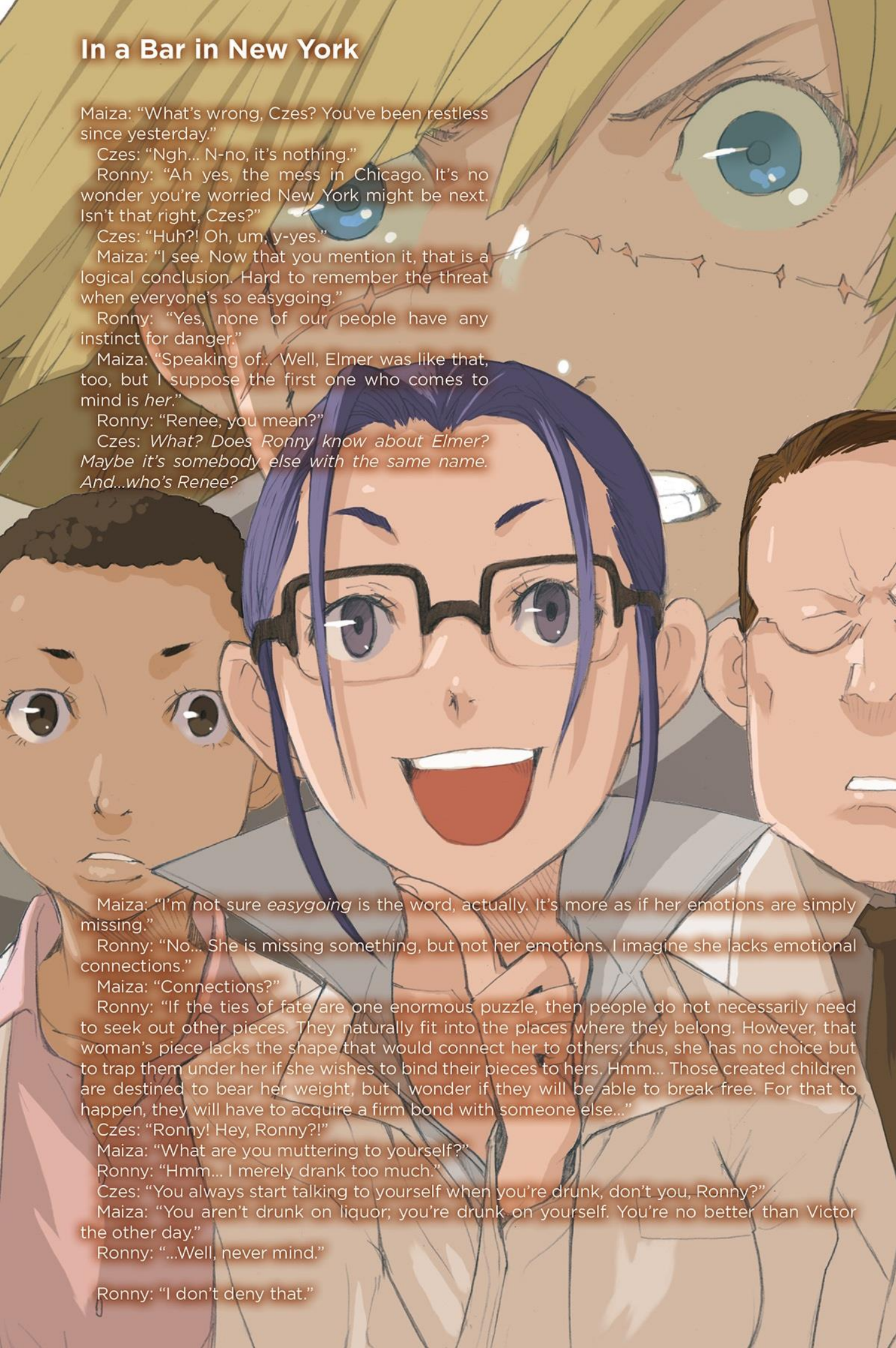
"Hey, it's just like life. Even if you know you're gonna die, living's way too much fun. That's what makes it so enjoyable: knowing death's on its way... But too many people don't know that. Just thinking of the instant I lecture fellas like that on life is enough to make me feel so alive, I can hardly stand it."

"Easy there."

"As far as my baby's concerned, her life is a jigsaw puzzle. The second she gets all her pieces together, I'll take her and— Whoops. Sorry about that. Got a little sappy there."

"...Sappy?!"

In a Bar in New York



Maiza: "What's wrong, Czes? You've been restless since yesterday."

Czes: "Ngh... N-no, it's nothing."

Ronny: "Ah yes, the mess in Chicago. It's no wonder you're worried New York might be next. Isn't that right, Czes?"

Czes: "Huh?! Oh, um, y-yes."

Maiza: "I see. Now that you mention it, that is a logical conclusion. Hard to remember the threat when everyone's so easygoing."

Ronny: "Yes, none of our people have any instinct for danger."

Maiza: "Speaking of... Well, Elmer was like that, too, but I suppose the first one who comes to mind is *her*."

Ronny: "Renee, you mean?"

Czes: *What? Does Ronny know about Elmer? Maybe it's somebody else with the same name. And...who's Renee?*

Maiza: "I'm not sure *easygoing* is the word, actually. It's more as if her emotions are simply missing."

Ronny: "No... She is missing something, but not her emotions. I imagine she lacks emotional connections."

Maiza: "Connections?"

Ronny: "If the ties of fate are one enormous puzzle, then people do not necessarily need to seek out other pieces. They naturally fit into the places where they belong. However, that woman's piece lacks the shape that would connect her to others; thus, she has no choice but to trap them under her if she wishes to bind their pieces to hers. Hmm... Those created children are destined to bear her weight, but I wonder if they will be able to break free. For that to happen, they will have to acquire a firm bond with someone else..."

Czes: "Ronny! Hey, Ronny?!"

Maiza: "What are you muttering to yourself?"

Ronny: "Hmm... I merely drank too much."

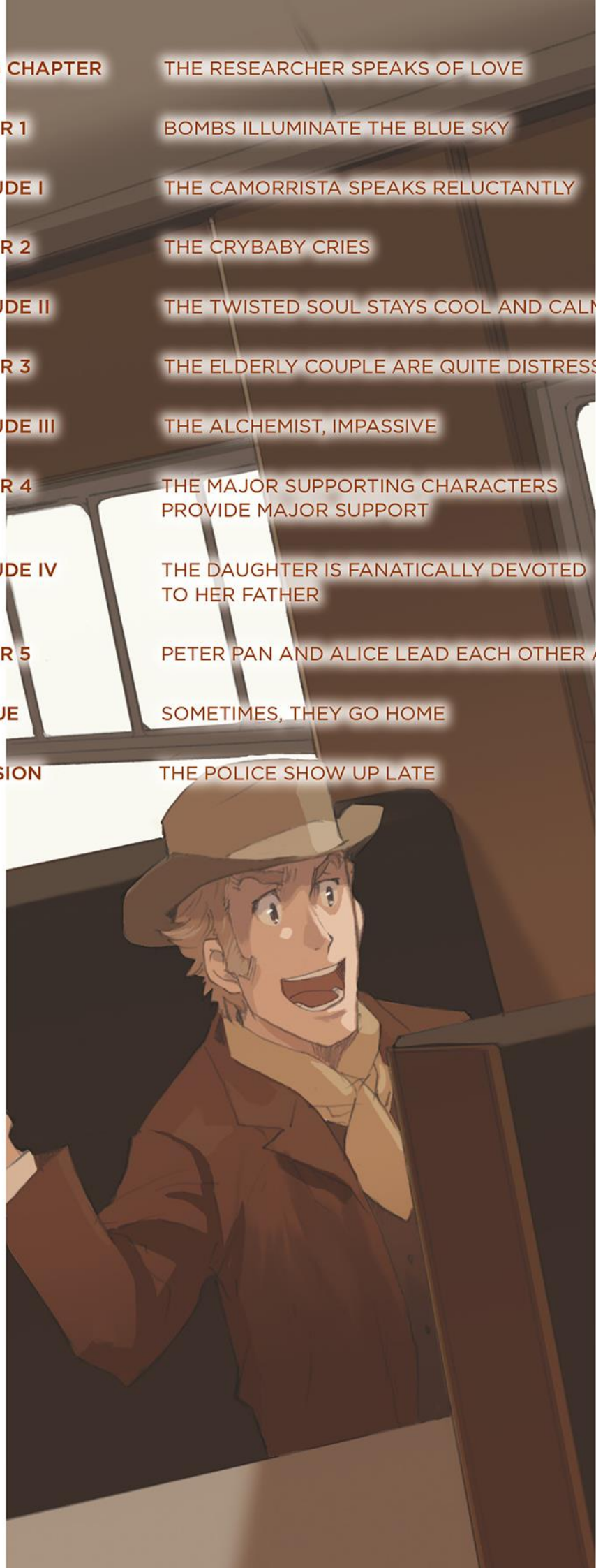
Czes: "You always start talking to yourself when you're drunk, don't you, Ronny?"

Maiza: "You aren't drunk on liquor; you're drunk on yourself. You're no better than Victor the other day."

Ronny: "...Well, never mind."

Ronny: "I don't deny that."

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1934 Peter Pan in Chains: Finale

VOLUME 10

RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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BACCANO!, Volume 10: 1934 PETER PAN IN CHAINS: FINALE

RYOHGO NARITA

Translation by Taylor Engel

Cover art by Katsumi Enami

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CHARACTERS

Jacuzzi	The leader of a band of delinquents. An extreme crybaby. He'll be twenty soon, so he's thinking about his future.
Nice	Jacuzzi's girl. A bomb fiend who wears glasses over an eye patch. Lately, she's been really into Japanese fireworks.
Firo Prochainezo	A young Martillo Family executive. Baby-faced and not happy about it.
Ladd Russo	The nephew of the Russo Family don. A bloodthirsty killer with several screws loose.
Christopher Shaldred	One of Huey's hand-raised homunculi. Has red eyes and dolphin teeth, and could be mistaken for a vampire walking around.
Ricardo Russo	The grandchild of Placido, the Russo Family don. Concerned about having such a feminine appearance.
Graham Specter	A wrecker and Ladd's sworn kid brother. He seems to know Jacuzzi and Chané as well…

Shaft	Graham's underling. In charge of making snappy comebacks.
Rail	A member of Lamia, a group of Huey's henchmen. A bomb fiend with a heavily scarred face. Idolizes Nice.
"The Poet"	A member of Lamia. A master-like figure who's partially responsible for the odd speech modes of Christopher and the others.
Sickle	A member of Lamia. A beauty with amazing footwork. Despite being a capoeira user, she's always unfriendly.
Sham	A member of Lamia. A spy and liaison who's cloaked in mystery.
Hilton	A member of Lamia. A spy and liaison, like Sham.
Leeza	A member of Lamia…or so it seems, but she doesn't quite fit in. Huey's daughter.
Huey Laforet	One of the immortals and Chané's father. He's currently in jail, but…
Renee Parmedes Branvillier	A Nebula executive. She seems a little dim—because she is—but she's constantly smiling and cheerfully cruel.

Gustav St. Germain	The vice president of the *Daily Days* newspaper. A shrewd journalist with a dignified voice. This is background information that won't show up in the main story, but he has a photographic memory.
Carol	The *DD* newspaper's young photographer. Couldn't possibly be out of elementary school. A self-proclaimed "courageous coward."
Isaac Dian	Just like always.
Miria Harvent	Just like always?

Linking Chapter: The Researcher Speaks of Love

A conversation with Mr. Salomé Carpenter, head of Rhythm, a research institute under the direct control of Huey Laforet

I must say, the outcome of this matter was truly unfortunate.

A trivial miscommunication led to the loss of an important research subject.

Even though it was less than a decade since our observations began… What a terrible shame.

It was No. 0038: the research subject we named Rail for the sake of convenience.

I wonder if the four-digit numbers imply that Huey intends to create at least a thousand of these guinea pigs. I am a mere human, mind you, and it isn't likely that I will live long enough to see the results, in any case… Well, to an individual who has eternity, even four digits may seem few.

I would like to say that I've strayed from the topic, but I haven't, actually.

Yes, the number of research subjects with which I will be able to engage during my lifetime is a mere fraction, one small part of the whole.

That is why— That is precisely why—

I feel I have watched over the results of each individual subject with scrupulous care. Losing No. 0038—Rail—like this is unbelievably sad.

At present, we have created up to No. 0068, but not even half have managed to exist for a sustained length of time. Having created and processed them ourselves does make that fact painful.

Rail had been processed in a rather special way. Mind you, it was partially coincidence.

Are you acquainted with the term *analgesia*?

It is a congenital disorder in which the entire body is insensitive to pain. The sensation in Rail's skin isn't truly the same thing…but it is quite similar. Every subject whose brain we tampered with ended up ruined, you see. Instead, we tinkered with the ganglia throughout his body, which are connected to the brain, and this was the half-accidental result.

…My conjecture, although it's rather a leap, is this: His brain, which was generated as a homunculus's, may have evolved to refuse to transmit pain, in the same way a fuse will blow under excessive voltage.

That's right. That's why, initially, we cut into Rail's body without using anesthetic.

We did it little by little, in order to determine how much pain he and the other homunculi were able to endure.

I believe he experienced more physical agony than most humans experience over their entire lives—diverse and concentrated over a very short time. I heard there is a marvelous torture expert in New York who uses scissors in his work, and I would very much like to hear his opinion on the subject. Rail suffered such a level of pain.

However, it was… What was it, about five years ago? Rail's sense of pain may have begun to disappear when Huey and I cut into him. Ah yes, that's definitely it. That was when Rail stopped screaming. Intriguingly, as he stopped feeling pain, he seemed to have become convinced that he was a "thing."

As far as we can tell, Rail is under the impression that we administered an anesthetic partway through. He seemed mystified by the fact that his sensation didn't return.

Well, it sounds as though the sensation did gradually return that time. However, we repeated the process over and over, and in the end, his sense of pain faded away.

Yes, that's right. That's how it was. We cut Rail up again and again. You could say the suture scars that run all over his body are the proof of all our research.

For that very reason, it will be distressing if he doesn't delight in his immunity to pain.

Naturally, it is inconvenient as well. Pain is an important signal that alerts the body to danger.

I had hoped to research his growth in the future, along with so many other things. What a terrible shame it turned out this way.

I know of one other similar case.

Rather than the sense of pain, what was damaged was what one might call emotions.

The individual is a man named Elmer C. Albatross, Huey's old friend.

When he was young, unimaginable suffering was inflicted on him constantly, and as a result, I'm told he is no longer able to tell whether he is happy or unhappy. Perhaps his emotional circuits were warped. Now that he is an immortal, they say he lives to make the entire world happy.

To an ordinary person, that is the ideal; to a lunatic, it is probably the truth.

I felt this Elmer fellow would be worth observing, but Huey stopped me.

He wouldn't allow such a dear friend as Elmer to be treated as a guinea pig. Well, his phrasing wasn't so sentimental, but that is the general gist of what he said. This from a man who sees everything in

the world, even his own daughters, as test subjects… Coming from him, it sounded strange, but apparently to Huey, Elmer is the chain that keeps him connected to the world.

…Ah, my apologies. This time, I really did stray off topic.

Be that as it may, while Rail's history is similar to Elmer's, the younger chose to live in the exact opposite way. He decided to hate most of the world, including us… Or possibly he despised it.

He also displayed an obvious fear of our lab coats.

It was rather comical to see a child who despised us grow frightened at the sight of us.

To Rail, we were probably an intolerable trauma. The pain must have been difficult to understand. That said, there's no way to verify it now.

…Hmm? What is it?

How could we do something so cruel to a young boy?

Yes, you're right. It really was cruel.

Even if we saw *that*, not as a human, but merely as a test subject, no different from a guinea pig…

Unforgivable. I do think it's an act that must not be forgiven, yes.

Every time Rail's screams rang in our ears, our hearts ached with terrible guilt and regret, doubts and misgivings about the fact that we were still alive… All sorts of things welled up and lodged in our throats.

However, we were able to endure that suffering and sorrow.

Why?

I should think that's obvious.

Because we loved him!

We were able to withstand the guilt because of our love—our boundless guilt at having done something so horrible to Rail and the others.

We were able to overcome the awareness of our sin, which bound us, because we loved our test subjects! Our love enables us to do even the cruelest things!

Come to think of it, I saw something in the notes left by the technician before me. Apparently, there was an immortal who said the same things I've just said: Because he loved someone, he was able to endure the pain of abusing him.

I wonder who it was. I hear he's already been eaten…by the boy immortal who was the object of his love, you see. I think it was…Fermet. The boy's name was Czeslaw… I believe that's correct.

Ah, my apologies. I seem to have gone off topic again. As a matter of fact, even if Rail had eaten or otherwise killed me, I think I would have accepted everything. I presume that is what love is.

To him, we are his creators. His god.

I am neither an atheist nor a deist. I believe in the existence of God.

And it is because of that belief that I am able to recognize that, to the homunculi, we are divine.

God's love is infinite. My love for Rail is the same.

For that very reason, our tears know no end.

A creature we continually showered with love has vanished from this world so suddenly, far too suddenly.

…You wish to hear the details of how he was lost?

Are you telling me to tell you everything, remember everything? Do you beckon me once more to the depths of sorrow?

That's the trouble with information brokers!

Still, very well. I'll tell you.

After all, there may be some meaning in reintegrating the results we observed and the information we later acquired by relating them.

If we consolidate the information received from Sham and Hilton, it appears that the main cause was a certain couple…and the delinquent mob accompanying them.

Of course, that unhinged woman from the research department at Nebula, Christopher, and that Graham fellow—a surviving member of the Russo Family—were more than a little involved. Strictly speaking, the same is true of a man named Firo Prochainezo, who was in prison at the time of the incident.

Now then, where shall I begin…? Well, this is Rail's story, after all, so let me begin with him.

After his friend Frank was taken from him, our abject guinea pig began a gradual slide into madness.

It happened little by little, but steadily.

By the time he set off for the dark city in order to save Frank—or, to be accurate, to wreak his vengeance upon the people who had stolen Frank—his heart may already have been half-broken.

Such was the desperation behind Rail's actions.

…No. It wasn't just himself that he was attempting to get rid of. It was as if he was trying to discard everything in the world.

CHAPTER I
BOMBS ILLUMINATE THE BLUE SKY



CHAPTER 1: BOMBS ILLUMINATE THE BLUE SKY

Elleson Hill The suburbs

A brilliant flash.

Even in broad daylight, the flash from it was blinding.

Elleson Hill.

It was the name of a small town next to Chicago.

Even on a detailed map, the only thing there was its name, all alone. Maps on a broader scale didn't even note its existence.

But although this area was hidden in the shadow of a big city, its name was rather well-known throughout the country for certain reasons.

However, the reason for this lack of cartographical attention was due to the town's unique nature.

The landscape of this rather rural town consisted of a vast plain studded with a variety of buildings, large and small, and wide roads running every which way among them.

At a glance, it seemed like a quiet patch of farming villages, but in fact, there was almost no farmland to be seen on that plain. What little agriculture was there was surrounded by formidable fences, and in many cases, it wasn't possible to see beyond them.

Buildings that looked like ordinary residences were densely concentrated in one area of the town, but they were the exception. Most of the other structures were built at a distance from one another.

In some cases, two or three buildings stood together, and they were generally inside the same enclosure. It felt as if the town was dotted with several—or several dozen—schools.

All of these facilities had one thing in common.

Somewhere on every truck that entered and left the buildings, as well as on the buildings themselves, there was a certain logo.

The Nebula Corporation.

The logo represented an enormous group whose name was known all across America.

The omnipresent design was unique, said to have been based on a work by the German artist Carnald Strassburg.

In this city, Nebula's research facilities and warehouses stood in ranks, and most of its residents were involved with a single corporate group.

Related facilities stood in clusters according to the research they were conducting, and each cluster was distanced from the others because they were all connected to completely different businesses within the conglomerate. Among the children, rumor had it that the facilities were conducting sketchy experiments, and the distance was because there was no telling when they might explode.

One day, in this town…

…that rumor became reality in the most twisted way possible.

A radiant red light rose over everything, chasing back even the sunlight above.

The light should have flashed and been gone in an instant, but instead it faded slowly, burning a brilliant afterimage in the eyes of those who'd seen it.

Before anyone could process the afterimage (bleh), an earth-shattering roar rumbled through the sky.

Weightily, heavily, the rumbling mass of sound felt as if it was slowly tearing down the heavens.

And after that came a wall of heat sweeping over them.

Sound, light, and heat were rising all through the town.

The figures atop the nearby hill could see and feel all of it.

The small shape at the front of the group looked out over the town and blandly commented, “Oh, man. There it goes.”

As he relished the sound of the explosions that rumbled through him, and the hot wind that buffeted him…

…the boy with the hard-to-miss suture scars on his face and arms murmured again:

“There’s no going back now.”

He’d been talking to himself, but a clear response came from behind him.

“I’m not entirely certain of that, Rail.”

“…I wasn’t asking you, Sham.”

A crowd of figures stood at his back. It was a group of men of all different ages, including a few young children.

One of them shook his head lightly at the boy he’d called Rail.

“It’s perfectly possible to go back. All you need to do is stop.”

“Get a load of you. It’s not like you got in my way.”

“Well, it isn’t as though your actions will obstruct Master Huey’s experiment. On the contrary, it’s no exaggeration to say that destroying Nebula’s facilities will move it along.”

“…”

Rail fell silent. Behind him, the group of featureless figures continued to gaze at him, quietly.

Then, as if he’d thought of something, he broke that silence again.

“Oh, does that rub you the wrong way? Do you feel like a puppet forced to dance in the palm of Master Huey’s hand?”

“…”

“Don’t worry. Master Huey currently has troubles of his own that prevent him from getting involved. He doesn’t seem to have a palm to spare for us.”

Ignoring the hint of irony in Sham’s reply, Rail gazed at the gradually spreading red light, which had followed the earlier flare: the flames rising all over town.

Unable to name the emotion passing through him, he quietly reflected on what he’d done.

Just half a day earlier…

…Frank, his precious friend, had been snatched right in front of him.

Actually, *wounded* was more accurate than *snatched*. Although he didn’t want to think it, depending on the current circumstances, they might have killed him.

As he remembered that moment, Rail gritted his teeth at the thought of that loathsome, terrifying group in lab coats—and at himself, for having been unable to do a thing.

That was precisely why he was standing here now, gazing at the flames of his revenge.

He’d tracked down the Shams he’d been able to contact in Chicago and asked for all the help he could get. He’d been planning to act

independently, help or no help, but they had agreed with a readiness he hadn't expected— And as a result, Elleson Hill was now in flames.

Rail had ended up going through nearly half the explosives he'd brought into Chicago, but the actual amount he'd used hadn't been that large.

He didn't know who had made them, but these explosives were terribly powerful and efficient. They were Rail's own weapon, but the first time he'd seen them in action, he couldn't stop himself from gasping in awe.

Then he'd ventured to use that power.

As if to declare his fear itself was his strength, he had used that fear to do away with his hesitation.

So that he would go insane. So he could reach that place the boy he'd been before hadn't been able to.

For that reason alone, a reason that couldn't really be called simple or wholehearted—

—bright light enveloped the town.

However, even as he looked at the results of the explosions he'd inflicted on the city, Rail's heart didn't undergo any great change.

It's not enough.

All that was building inside him was a new unease and a dark anger.

Something like this, something on this level— I can't get over it *yet, not yet.*

The flames were gradually dying down. They hadn't spread. The facilities probably had comprehensive disaster prevention systems. Surveying the damage, Rail gritted his teeth.

"Hey, was Frank in any of the facilities we blew up today?"

"Not that I saw, no."

“Hmm… Oh.”

“However, had he been, he might have died in one of the fires.”

Rail’s jaw clenched tighter at Sham’s insensitive remark, but he didn’t argue.

As he’d said, this had been a dangerous move, and he could have ended up hurting Frank in the process. Rail had been aware of that. Not that he could have come up with anything else.

The one behind him was clever and casual, but his words hung heavy on his heart.

“Well, ordinarily, I would say gathering information and targeting only the relevant facilities would be the best move, but I think this method is valid. If you set off that many explosions at once, I honestly doubt our opponent will have any time to spare for Frank.”

He had almost found meaning of a sort in the senseless rampage—though he could have stopped the destruction himself if he’d been so inclined—as he took a step forward with an inscrutable smile.

“You don’t really know what you should do yourself, correct?”

“…Man, just shut up,” Rail muttered, irritated, but Sham kept right on talking.

“If you’d like, shall I ask for Master Huey’s opinion? I think he could manage that much.”

“Shut *up*!”

Rail had yelled in spite of himself, but he immediately took a few calm breaths and tried again with the only person he could currently ask for advice.

“Hey, is going crazy a way out?”

“If you’re capable of recognizing your own insanity, I don’t think you can actually call it insanity—well, that’s my conclusion based on the

vast quantity of information I've accumulated, at least. No doubt Master Huey or Hilton would give a different answer."

Sham just kept bringing up Huey's name. Annoyed, Rail quietly asked him another question:

"What do you think Chris would say?"

"He went insane long ago. I expect he'd grin and tell you to try and keep up."

"Ha-ha. You don't understand him at all, Sham," Rail muttered, smiling with chagrin.

"Or…"

Sham's next comment made his chest tighten.

"If he values you, Rail, he might say something along these lines: 'I can't make you normal again. If you want to come over and be crazy with us, I can guide you, but I think you're teetering on the edge, so there's nothing I can do. Think about it for yourself and make up your own mind. After you've gone mad, will you spot a way out, or will you be able to see the future more clearly?' …Or thereabouts?"

"…"

Rail fell silent as Sham mimicked Christopher's vocal mannerisms.

They weren't Christopher's exact words, but Rail clearly remembered being told something very similar.

It was that night when he'd sobbed with despair and powerlessness. Well, "that night" being half a day ago.

But what Christopher had said to him back then sounded a lot like the speech he'd just heard.

He was mildly startled, and also a bit irritated by the fact this mere watchdog, this gofer in front of him, had a deeper understanding of Christopher than he did. Rail glared sullenly at the group behind him.

However, in the end, he couldn't argue. As Rail was wondering what he should do to them, he noticed something odd.

To be accurate, he'd noticed it quite a bit earlier, but his emotions had been so stirred up he hadn't been paying attention: Every member of the group behind him was male.

"? Say, Sham, are you the only one here? Where's Hilton?"

"She says her hands are full at the moment. She's got some trouble of her own to deal with. It's the matter involving Master Huey I mentioned earlier."

"What happened?"

"It sounds as though Master Huey was attacked, *and one of his eyes was gouged out and stolen*."

"Whoa…"

Huey Laforet.

He was the individual who'd brought him into existence as a perverse, artificial being, and Rail felt nothing for him but hatred. Still, he was more startled than anything when he heard about the eye-gouging. His second thought was *Serves him right*, but his first was *Someone managed to do that?*

To Rail, Huey always seemed so perfect in everything, like a natural-born ruler who always put himself in a position to manipulate others, and this had doubled his hatred and fear of him.

Rail's expression turned complicated, and the messenger smiled quietly.

"Are you glad that Master Huey has been hurt?"

"Not especially. I don't feel any better than before, and I'm not interested in the details. I don't care who did it or why. It's got nothin' to do with me."

Muttering masochistically, he finally looked back at Sham.

“But Sham, *you* look sort of happy today… Or am I seeing things?”

“Do I? I expect it’s only your imagination. After all, while I am delighted to be able to help you in your work, I am also dealing with the fact that Master Huey has been injured. Besides, I am merely a messenger and errand boy. My options are limited.”

“Oh yeah?” Then, Rail looked down slightly, took a pocket watch from his coat pocket, and opened its lid. “Kinda jealous you have any options at all.”

“…”

Rail’s attitude had returned to normal, as far as Sham could hear from that reply.

However, he had noticed something.

True, Rail hadn’t gone insane yet, but—

—he was in the process of *breaking*, little by little.

As Rail gazed at the hands of the watch, ticking ever forward, he shouted into the blue sky for no one’s benefit but his own.

“I mean, all I can do is blow everything to hell now!”

Then…yet another dazzling flash illuminated the town.

Turning his back on the bright, flickering flames and smoke, Rail spoke to the Shams quietly.

“So I’ll go as far as I can. And if that’s to Crazy Town, so be it.”

The emotion had vanished from Rail’s voice, and his stone-cold words disappeared into the sky along with the smoke.

“If it means I can go *somewhere*…I’ll go insane with a smile on my face.”

Interlude I: The Camorrista Speaks Reluctantly

Alcatraz Penitentiary Special underground cell

The Dungeon was a set of unique isolation cells, built underground on Alcatraz Island.

Dark though they were, something else lay deeper below.

In the very depths of the prison, not noted on any of the facility's blueprints…

…were *them*.

The special cell had been created for just one man.

It was roughly the size of a modest hotel room, too spacious for a cell—but considering the number of people in there now, it was feeling rather small.

"You bastards…"

The resentment was palpable in this spacious yet cramped-feeling room.

Hearing the concentrated malice filling that voice, Firo Prochainezo thought to himself:

If a curse could actually kill somebody, this is probably what that feels like.

A chill ran through him, as if the very sound of the voice had shaved years off his life. His eyes moved across the source, Ladd Russo, and took in the state of the room.

As he did, he was forced to review his current position.

Firo's place in this sequence of events was truly hard to pin down. *Simple* or *complex* didn't really cut it.

Firo had become immortal due to a chain of events some time ago, and his involvement in more recent trouble had attracted the attention of Victor Talbot, another immortal who belonged to the Bureau of Investigation.

Then, on the condition that his sweetheart Ennis's crimes would be overlooked, Firo had agreed to investigate Huey Laforet, yet another immortal imprisoned here in Alcatraz. However, just thirty minutes ago, some complications had arisen.

The guard who'd been showing him the way—a spy Huey had smuggled into Alcatraz, and his supposedly loyal subordinate—had proposed a deal to Firo.

"Would you cooperate with me…no, with *us*…and *gouge out one of Huey's eyes*?"

The request had been completely incomprehensible.

What's the point of gouging out an immortal's eye? Firo had wondered, but the man didn't give him a moment to ask.

He'd brought up Ennis—and had used her safety as bait.

As a result, just as Firo had grudgingly obeyed Victor's order, he'd reluctantly thrown in his lot with the man who'd introduced himself as Sham.

The whole time, his own powerlessness infuriated him, and he made no attempt to hide how much he loathed being in this position.

And now…

The guard who'd brought him here was near the door. He should have been out cold, courtesy of Ladd's fist, but he was back on his feet as though nothing had happened.

There was another guard inside the room, and the two of them were currently facing each other with Ladd in the middle.

In addition, three inmates stood around Ladd, albeit at a slight distance.

A small white guy. A heavily scarred black man. And an Asian man with tattoos on both arms.

Besides them, the room was occupied by two prone, motionless figures.

One was a man in white lying at Firo's feet. The other seemed terribly out of place in this prison: a young girl with black hair.

Firo let his eyes drift to the man at his feet—Huey Laforet, an immortal with a knife jutting from below the nape of his neck that had left him *only unconscious*—and thought for a little while. In his right hand, the eyeball he'd just gouged out squirmed, attempting to return to its owner and leaving his palm with a creepy sensation he wouldn't forget anytime soon.

So what do I do about this?

The men who were currently surrounding Ladd were a group that had called themselves Sham. Also known as the former Felix Walkens.

However, the depths of Firo's memories—well, the extremely unpleasant depths of someone else's memories—had told him that apparently "Sham" wasn't the name of a group. It was a being that was both *a group and a single entity*.

"Hey…"

As Firo attempted to calmly analyze the situation, the deadly-sounding voice addressed him.

A chill ran through him, and when he raised his head, he saw Ladd glaring at the Shams. There was a hint of unease in his expression, but the malice was still overwhelmingly clear.

“Hey, Firo. It sounds like you’re not really in cahoots with these fellas.”

“…Well, not really, I guess.”

Since he’d helped them gouge out Huey’s eye, he wasn’t sure he could claim to be uninvolved— But the men were so creepy that Firo decided to believe he wasn’t.

And right then, Sham reminded Firo why exactly he found them so unsettling.

The five men spoke in perfect sync, and their words echoed in the room as if they belonged to one being.

“““““My, my. That’s rather unkind of you.”””””

““““I don’t think you can say you aren’t with us.””””

“““Temporary though it may be, we do have an agreement.”””

““““I would like to stay on good terms with you in the future, Firo.””””

At first, all five men had spoken together, but then they began speaking in synchronized groups of three, like the sound was being played at random from various speakers around the room, and Firo was getting increasingly disturbed.

However, there was one man who wasn’t confused by the weirdness.

Ladd was very close to brimming over—not with anger or sadness, but with pure desire to kill—as he asked Firo a question. He phrased it as casually as he always did, even if the emotion behind it was far from normal.

“Yeah, so, I’ve got a real simple question for you.”

“…”

“These guys. *What the hell are they*?”

“Well…”

It was an extremely simple question, but for a moment, Firo was unsure how to reply.

On the other hand, the five men in question urged him on.

“““““It’s all right, Firo.”””””

“““Go ahead and tell him.”””

“““You can explain it in layman’s terms, can’t you?”””

“““““You’re the one with Szilard’s memories, after all.”””””

The five Shams spoke in unison and grinned at the exact same time.

Five men of different races, different ages, and with different faces wore the same fearless grin.

Feeling indescribably repulsed by both what they said and how they looked saying it, Firo gritted his teeth, sucked in a big breath, then heaved a deep, deep sigh.

“Fine. I’ll tell you.”

“Keep it short, all right, Firo? And if you happen to know of a fun way to beat these guys to a pulp, I couldn’t ask for more.”

Ladd was smiling, too, but his smile was more like very tightly gritted teeth.

His arms and legs were oddly loose, but if something set him off, a heavy fist would probably come flying at the five Shams immediately. Under normal circumstances, that would have already happened and brains would be flying across the room, but the Shams had said a name—“Lua”—that had checked Ladd’s lunacy right before it went critical.

“Keeping it short’s a tall order, but… You already know about immortals for some reason at least, so that’ll help.”

Ladd was undeniably the one itching for blood the most. However, Firo’s disgusted glare was directed not at Ladd and the feral light in his eyes, but at the perfectly calm quintet.

Slowly, he began to relay what he knew about them.

“This old guy named Szilard was researching a liquor of immortality…a kind of drug, I guess you’d call it. He had trouble completing it, but these guys are guinea pigs for a by-product. If you drink it, your mind and memories get completely taken over.”

“…By who?”

“Nobody. Well, if I had to say…”

“Um… *By the drug itself. It’s conscious*.”



Szilard Quates and the researchers who worked with him had conducted their research in pursuit of two objectives: a perfect homunculus and immortality.

In the process of reconstructing the formula for the liquor of immortality, a formula that existed only in the memories of a man named Maiza Avaro, Szilard had created a failed version of the solution.

It was an unrefined product that bestowed an incomplete immortality: It repaired any and all physical damage, but didn’t stop the aging process.

In the end, failed though it was, it still had its uses.

It had given Szilard an idea for a new homunculus.

He'd wondered whether the immortality granted by the demon's liquor—perfect or failed—might be the result of fusing cells with *something* from a different dimension.

He realized immortality might be brought about by inducing possession—to borrow a term from the arcane—by a colony of something that regenerated infinitely.

Like a school of sardines taking the shape of a single creature, was it possible that an alien colony took possession of human cells, or even smaller units, then always regenerated them as its own flesh whenever they were damaged?

At that point, Szilard had flipped the idea on its head.

If it was possible to possess a human body with *something* from a phase-shifted dimension—something that might or might not even be a living creature…

…would it be possible to make that being possess multiple bodies here?

For example, if he created a solution based on that theory, then made multiple people drink it simultaneously, would the being who had been forcibly pulled from its space and bound to this world be able to move several people at once?

And if so…would these people, bundled into a single entity through that other world, be able to share all their sensations and experiences practically instantaneously?

According to Szilard's dormant memories inside Firo, that research was still incomplete, and now it was being continued by Szilard's descendants.

The results of this research had yet to be seen, but the knowledge of the many alchemists Szilard had assimilated surged in his mind, creating a vague certainty in Firo.

This theory—which would create a godlike puppet master, a single mind that controlled multiple people—would probably eventually be borne out.

And what he was seeing right now was the result.



“So then…lemme get this straight.”

After hearing the gist, Ladd asked Firo a question. His arms still dangled limply.

“You’re sayin’ these fellas are a buncha puppets all possessed by the same ghost?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“Which means…these guys have friends with— These guys *are* with Lua in person, and the second I do anything to ’em, they’ll know about it over there?”

Ladd’s words sounded a little strangled, and the five men, who were really one and the same, all smiled at him.

“““““You’re quick on the uptake. That’s a great help.”””””

The voices came at him from all directions, and for just a moment, Ladd lowered his eyes. Then, grinning, he flung his arms wide, and his steel-colored false arm awkwardly rose, gleaming eerily in the light.

“Ohhh, ohhh, ohhh. Yeah, yeah, I follow. I’ll follow ya all the way to the bottom of the ocean and all the way up to the stars…well, that’s what I’d like to tell you, but there’s two things, just two things, that I really gotta check.”

“““““And what would those be?”””””

“First, you’re tellin’ me you people…*you yourself* won’t die, no matter what. Is that what you’re saying?”

“““““Not unless I decide to commit suicide, or the earth itself is destroyed.””””””” the Shams answered with an easy, confident smile, and in that instant—

?! Firo, listening to the conversation at a distance, felt an awful chill run through him. *What…is that?*

It wasn’t that the Shams had said something horrifying.

Firo’s entire body was reacting to a more fundamental change.

Earlier, this room had been nothing more than a simple dungeon cell, but now it was like a cage he was locked in with a starving, ferocious animal. He could sense terrible danger approaching.

Oh, that’s it. I know what changed.

Right now, one of his five senses had to be picking up on some sort of difference, something that made his instincts freeze over. Firo immediately concentrated, searching for the anomaly making him feel so cold, and spotted it right away.

He’s smiling…?

This bastard Ladd…is smiling.

That was all. The only thing that had changed.

The curve of Ladd’s lips was terribly cheerful, although the malice rolling off him was the same as ever.

Firo had seen that smile before.

Earlier, when Ladd had decked the large black Sham in the dining hall, he’d been wearing a smile just like this one.

Except back then, it wasn't layered with anger or bloodlust, and even though this smile was the same type, looking at it felt like something completely different.

If the earlier one had been a carnivore's smile, the feel of this one was nearly impossible to describe. Sham didn't seem to be alert to any danger, and the difference between Firo's acuity and his was patently obvious.

Probably… Well, I dunno, but I bet… If you could make some tool for a smile that kills, like a guillotine or a rifle, it might look like this.

With enough lunacy in his expression to make Firo back away, Ladd quietly continued with his questions.

"Second one: How's Lua? Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed?"

""""""For the moment, yes. It's entirely up to you."""""""

Yikes, I wouldn't say that if I were you.

As he watched Sham taunt his opponent, Firo privately became certain of something. He couldn't begin to guess at the specifics, but any more provocation and something nasty was bound to happen.

It was probably best if he stuck to watching from the sidelines and stayed out of it.

Just as Firo made the call, the dread-inducing aura around the actor on the stage in front of him swelled even greater.

"I see. So that means…this is one of those times, huh? All I can do is believe in her."

""""""Yes, pray for her safety and cooperate with—"""""""

"Okay then! I believe!"

""""""Huh?!"""""""

The voices spoke as a quartet.

The words should have come from five mouths at once, but one of the mouths—the one belonging to the guard who'd first brought Firo here—had been plugged with Ladd's right fist and the force of a pile driver.

Yanking out his hand, Ladd used the recoil to slam a clean backhanded fist into the Asian Sham who stood behind him.

His face crushed, the guard slid to the floor, and in almost the same moment, the Asian man flew headfirst into the wall.

"Hey, it's nothing big."

""""Wai— Wait just a—""""

Ladd ran up the black man's torso, leaped through the air, spun around, and slammed the sole of his shoe into the face of the other guard.

"I just shuffled my priorities around a little."

""Don't you care what happens to the hostage?!""

The Shams had finally gotten a handle on the situation, but Ladd was still grinning, and—

—he sank a straight punch with all his weight behind it into the throat of the big man he'd used as a springboard.

There was a mixture of two sounds—a belch of escaping air, and the light *crunch* of something being crushed—and the black man toppled over backward like a falling domino.

Ladd turned to face the remaining man, the little white guy, looking truly refreshed.

"Like I said, I believe in her."

"Y-you can't be serious…"

The small man's eyes grew round. Ladd rolled his head, popping his neck, and replied, "Sure I am. I believe more in her than I believe the big blue sky won't come tumbling down! As modestly as I believe I'm really me right here and now! With dreams as great as Jack Dempsey! That's how solid and sure I believe in Lua!"

"Wha…?"

The solitary Sham scooted back as if he couldn't comprehend the creature in front of him, but Ladd stepped forward enough to close the gap and close in, yelling.

"Aah… This is bad, this is real, real bad. Aaaaaabsolutely. Sheesh. Y'see, when you're my age, people start callin' you pops and you can't even argue back. You gotta settle down, and I was gonna do it, too, but instead I hear Lua's name and now I just can't. It's all your fault, so how're you gonna make it up to me? Goddammit. It might be hard to believe, but I was tryna be a model prisoner. Except for a little break to kill Huey over there."

"Y-your logic makes no sense!!"

"It makes no sense? Well, don't worry about that, pal; I don't get what passes for logic in this world, either, but the sun still rose in the sky and sank across the ocean today, didn't it? See, what's important—you listenin' to me? What's important ain't gettin' the logic behind the fact. It's seein' it in front of you, seein' that inescapable reality, and choosin' whether you wanna take it as it comes, fight it, or pretend you never saw it at all. Am I wrong? Well, you can say I am, but I ain't buyin' it!"

Ladd was even more wired than he'd been when he first appeared in the room, and he kept dancing back and forth between his feet.

As Firo watched Ladd babbling with the force of an angry torrent, it struck him as somehow surreal. However, the sensation of Huey's

eyeball wriggling in his hand told him in no uncertain terms that this was reality.



Yeesh, get a load of this guy. And I thought Isaac and Claire were hyper.

At this point, this was about the only emotion Firo could muster. In front of him, the ludicrous exchange between the enlightened and the utterly confused went on.

“W-wait, don’t you care what happens to your girl? To Lua?!”

“Close your mouth, fella. I told you, I believe in her. What, somethin’ wrong with your ears? Somethin’ wrong with your mind that can’t figure out what I’m saying? No worries. A few good whacks should fix that. Or if it doesn’t, you might die, and then you won’t have to worry about being dumb anymore. You’ll be free. Okay?”

“Hold on a minute! The conversation’s not making any sense!”

“That’s fine. As long as it makes sense to me. There may be a few barriers between us, but it’s so fine it’s almost too much. We just have to take ’em down one at a time, ain’t that right? ‘Vwip,’ ‘zip,’ ‘zoop,’ ‘blurrr,’ and down they go! For starters, yeah, let’s—”

Then, abruptly, he broke off.

“Aaaaah, y’know what? Never mind. Pain in the ass.”

Ladd swung his arm in a powerful uppercut, right into the little guy’s half-open mouth.

“Mguph!”

The arm didn’t slow down at all, and the man shot into the air like a missile launched from a catapult, sketching an arc through space.

An arc that ended with Firo.

Hey, whoa. Don’t throw stuff into the audience.

As that thought went through his head, he immediately retreated a step.

But not to evade. Instead, he reared back and rammed his head into the man who was flying his way.

“Gah!”

Their skulls connected, and the little man bounced back and fell to the ground, where he lay still.

“……Ow.”

Firo rubbed his forehead. Ladd waved his right hand at him, looking incredibly refreshed.

“Whoops. Sorry ’bout that, fella.”

“Nah. I was just thinkin’ I wanted to deck him myself. Now I have plausible deniability.”

Firo gave a small, wry smile, but he immediately pulled himself together and asked Ladd a question. The Martillo executive had been wondering about his incoherent conversation with the small man, too.

“So this Lua… What was it about her that you believed in?”

“Hmm? Oh. Oho. You want to hear me get all sappy about my girl? Sure thing, pal. I’ll assume you’re a friend and tell you all about it! I’ll regale you with every last detail of the saccharine goodness in the sweet, sweet tale of success we’ve woven together, all the syrupy little—”

“Keep it short, all right, Ladd?” Firo retorted, using the same words Ladd had said to him a moment earlier.

Ladd shrugged, looking disappointed— But then he nodded in agreement and calmly began explaining his relationship with Lua.

“Well, here’s the short version, then. I promised her I’d kill her; she promised me she’d let me. Even though I’m the scum of the earth, she was nice enough to say I could kill her. There ya have it.”

“That’s too short.”

The explanation had left out far too much, and Firo was as bewildered as a man could get, but Ladd didn’t seem to care as he went on energetically.

“Well, that part’s a long story, so fill in the blanks yourself. Anyway. She promised that she’d let me kill her! Me and me alone! That means she’d never let herself get killed by these crazy goons! I just believed, and that’s all there is to it. Do you get it now?”

“And how do you know this?”

“Instinct.”

“That’s it…?!”

Aaaaargh, I give up. This guy really does have a few screws loose.

Firo was getting a headache, although it was different from the ones he got when he was talking with Isaac and Miria. He gave an exasperated sigh, then launched into a lecture.

“Listen, just think about it. She can try to not get killed all she wants, but if it’s gonna happen, it’s gonna happen. If it does, are you ready to bear the consequences?”

At Firo’s question, Ladd put a hand to his chin and thought for a while.

“Oho… So if that happens, it’ll be like I killed her indirectly, huh? …Does that sound about right?”

“I couldn’t possibly tell you.”

His answer sounded exasperated, but Ladd wasn’t listening.

“I’d like to say yes, but then Lua would get all the fun. Although maybe if I got my kicks tearing these guys apart instead… AAAAAaaaaaah! Nope, no way, no way! A Dempsey Roll of negativity just put my heart down for the count! I can’t even think about not

getting to carefully torture Lua to death with my own hands, and I bet Lua wants her life to end with me slowly breaking her neck… Well, that's what I think. What about you, Firo?"

Firo looked even wearier after this new question. He pondered the other man's words, and when his brain finally managed to decipher them, he responded slowly, with a different question.

"Lemme ask you a more basic question: Is there no option where nobody's killing each other or getting killed, and you both just live happily ever after?"

"Nope… No, hang on a second…… Yeah, no, there isn't."

"Waitwaitwait, remind me what your relationship with Lua is again."

"Friends, lovers, fiancés," Ladd declared easily, leaving Firo even more at a loss. "Right… Now that you mention it, I'm getting real worried about Lua. Who should I kill for now to make sure she's safe…? Ha! This is getting kinda fun, ain't it, Firo?!"

"No."

"Oh yeah? Well, I'm having fun! Okayokayokay… This is a kill-or-be-killed situation, and now, the option of Lua getting killed is on the table, too! No, that really ain't fun, is it…? Here's some more food for thought. If I can't stand fellas who think they're never gonna be killed, is it a crime to assume my own lover's never gonna get killed? What do you think?"

"…I'll…get back to you on that."

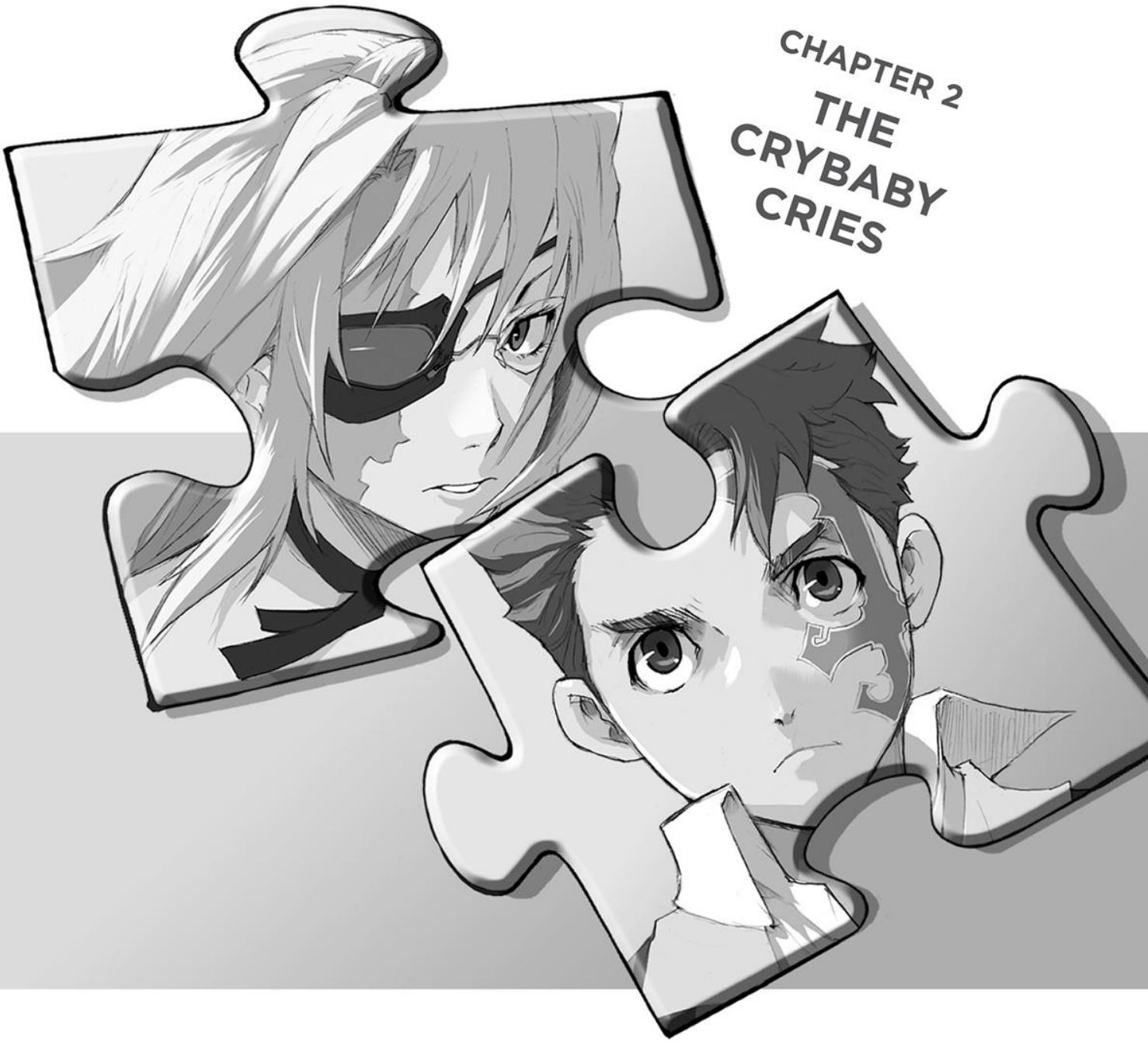
He was standing among several bodies, accompanied only by a bloodthirsty killer with bats in the belfry.

C'mon… Come on*…*

What am I supposed to do, here?!

Firo felt like crying. In his hand, the eyeball was still squirming.

The twitching, twisting eye seemed to be sneering at him.



CHAPTER 2
THE CRYBABY CRIES

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Inside Chicago Union Station

Chicago Union Station stood grandly in the city for which it was named, a major terminal on the transcontinental railroad.

The station building had been completed recently, in 1925, and it was such a novel sight that first-time visitors felt as though they'd just arrived in a freshly minted opera house.

With majestic columns like something out of a Grecian temple, the building itself had the beautiful symmetry of a museum, and today, as always, travelers were passing through its solemn atmosphere.

Later, this station would make its existence known across America and around the world as the setting of the infamous gunfight scene in the movie *The Untouchables*, but…

At present, there were no detectable signs of an impending gun battle. Only the sounds of a pitiful whine.

"Ngh, what'll I do? I lost him…"

A young man trudged through the station, which was emptier than usual.

He had a big tattoo of a sword on his face, but he wore the expression of a boy shouldering all the despair in the world, and the people passing by him would have found him hard to describe.

He was heading toward a big group of more than twenty delinquents.

Some of them had the hard faces of people who had killed before, and some of them were even toying with knives, in broad daylight, out in public. An enormous man who seemed to be Mexican had a very strong presence without even trying, wordlessly intimidating the people around him.

The onlookers thought the tattooed boy might be heading to his own death at the hands of those delinquents, but their fears turned out to be groundless.

“Jacuzzi, was everything okay?” Looking concerned, a scarred girl wearing glasses over an eye patch ran up to the tattooed kid.

“Ngh… H-he disappeared… Where could he have gone…?”

“Never mind that, Jacuzzi, just calm down. It’s okay. Everything’s gonna be fine.” As she spoke, the girl, Nice, looked mildly exasperated.

Jacuzzi Splot—the tattooed young man, and the leader of the gang of delinquents—pleaded with her in reply, his face crumpling even more. “Nice, what should we do? Maybe he hid because he noticed us…! Luh, l-l-let’s hurry and find Isaac and Graham and then get outta here!”

“I already told you, Isaac isn’t gonna be here until tomorrow.”

Nice took Jacuzzi’s hands, as if she were trying to calm a child. Behind her, several of the delinquents peeked in at the sniffling Jacuzzi, insensitive to the mood.

“Hey, what’s up? Why’d you just run into the train like that?”

“For a second there, I thought you were actually lamming off.” “I was half-sure he was!” “I was one hundred percent positive you were, so why’d you come back? Gimme back my money!”

“Huh?! What money?!”

“Fine, sheesh, if you don’t remember, I’ll loan you some now.” “Me too.” “Me three.” “Pay me back five times the amount ten days from now.”

“Whaaaaaa…?! Wait— I—I can’t take that!”

The ridiculous suggestions flustered Jacuzzi even more, and his gaze was darting around even worse than usual.

“Well, joking aside, who was that guy?” one delinquent asked in an easygoing voice.

“Wh-who was…? That was a Russo Family executive!” As the tattooed boy warned his companions about the impending danger, his eyes filled with tears. “I—I didn’t notice until Nice told me, either, but… Wh-when she did, that scar on his face… I’m pretty sure he was a Russo executive.”

The Russo Family.

They were a mafia syndicate that claimed part of Chicago as their territory, and they had a bone to pick with Jacuzzi’s group. They were long past the point of unfavorable relations; both parties had seen fatalities, and not only were amicable settlements or alliances out of the question, more deaths seemed far from unlikely.

For that very reason, Jacuzzi had resisted the idea of coming to Chicago to the very end, fearful that he and his friends were putting themselves in danger, but…

…the friends in question were surprisingly free of any sense of crisis as they spoke their minds.

“What? The Russos?”

“Well, lucky us.” “Let’s get ’em.” “Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“And hey, what were you thinking, going after somebody like that all by yourself?”

“You’re lousy in a fight, fella. Don’t do nothin’ crazy!”

“Before you go tryin’ to figure out who people are, first you gotta figure out what *you* are.”

All he heard were extremely belligerent views and criticism, and Jacuzzi crouched down on the spot, no longer sure what he should do.

“Ngh, you’re all so mean…”

“What are you talking about? I said, take another look at what you are.”

“You ain’t made for fighting. You’re made to take charge of us, get me?”

“Yeah, let us handle the dirty work.” “You may be dumb, Jacuzzi, but you’re smarter’n us!”

“Hya-haaaw!” “Nothin’ wrong with being a crybaby. After all, you’re lousy in a fight.”

The amount of relative compliments had increased, but Jacuzzi was hugging his head and covering his ears so firmly he didn’t hear them.

In the midst of it all, Jacuzzi reviewed his current circumstances.

Aaaaah, why did this happen?

Lunchtime yesterday, we were still in New York…

At noon the day before, the news had come bursting into his gang’s home base in Millionaires’ Row.

The radio had informed them that there had been explosions in three hundred locations in Chicago. The police were viewing the incidents as a premeditated crime, and although the particulars weren’t clear, Placido Russo, the don of the Russo Family, had been identified as a suspect.

In addition, that same day, a total of two hundred people had gone missing, and an ominous atmosphere currently hung over Chicago.

At that point in time, he'd been able to limit his worrying to Graham Specter, an acquaintance of theirs who was currently in the city— But right after they'd heard the report, two visitors had come to call.

Yeah, Tim and Adele told me Graham had gotten into some trouble…and then I got even more worried, and then…

Their hearts had begun to waver, and the finishing blow had come in the form of a telephone call to the mansion from all the way on the other side of the continent.

Their friend Isaac Dian had been arrested for theft a little while back, and he'd called to tell them he'd finished serving his time and had been released without any trouble. The news had made Jacuzzi and the others so happy that they'd temporarily forgotten their earlier unease.

However… As the sight of Miria Harvent talking with her sweetheart on the phone warmed his heart, the situation had begun to drift in an odd direction.

"Uh-huh, uh-huh! Okay, Isaac! I'll go to Chicago right now and wait for you!"

Yes, that's how it was… Back then, I didn't realize what Miria was saying at all.

Apparently, Isaac hadn't had the train fare to make it all the way to New York, and he could just barely afford a ticket to Chicago.

…Which was why he wanted Miria to take his wallet and meet him there.

At first, Jacuzzi had desperately tried to stop her, but she was already blind to everything except Isaac, and he knew immediately she couldn't be dissuaded.

It was the worst possible timing because Nice, a natural-born bomb fiend, had taken an interest in the bombings, and then their friends

had jumped in as they always did and started kicking up their usual ruckus, and then—

The next thing I knew, I was on a train.

Feeling disgusted with himself for going along with this, Jacuzzi spent a little while reexamining his present situation— And then he clapped his hands together in realization, bolting to his feet like a spring-loaded doll.

“I—I know! L-let’s just go to San Francisco to pick Isaac up! Wh-whatever we do, we have to get out of from Chicago as fast as we can…”

Convinced of his own genius, Jacuzzi was positively radiant. However, Nice looked at him curiously.

“If we leave for San Francisco now, won’t we just miss each other along the way?”

“Oh—”

“Besides… If we board that train, we’ll be traveling with that Russo executive, you know.”

“Aaaaaah?!”

It was an argument even a child could follow, and Jacuzzi choked on both his tears and any further arguments.

“Plus, what about Graham?”

“Aaaaaaah, what do we do? D-do you think we could maybe find him in the next five minutes or so? I-if Graham was here, Russo Family executives wouldn’t scare me…maybe… No, we can’t do that; this is our problem, and we can’t drag him into it.”

As Jacuzzi whimpered, the castigation of the delinquents around him fell heavy on his ears.

“Man, I was just about to chew you out for finally stooping to leaning on others, but then you stopped yourself, huh, punk? Well done.”

“Geez, quit crying already!” “Find him in five minutes? Quit talking crazy.” “Hya-haah.”

“Jacuzzi, man… Five minutes? Is that all Graham’s worth to you?!”

“Think back! Remember the stuff he did for us! Remember the morning when we slugged away at each other on a hill, by the light of the setting sun!”

“Mgh, but you people just say you never meet Graham.”

“Don’t remember that part!” “You’re trashing our plan for messing with Jacuzzi!” “Donny, you moron!”

“Nugah, sorry.”

“So what, you’re planning to run into him in five minutes and drag him out of Chicago?” “He didn’t include the time he’ll need to talk him into it.” “Actually, if Jacuzzi started blubbering and telling him a sob story, I get the feeling it would probably go pretty fast.”

“Actually, somebody should go look for my little sister.”

“Actually, you don’t have a little sister.”

“Actually, you should find a girl who’ll agree to be my new little sister…”

“Actually, shut up.” “Shut up.” “Shut up.” “Hya-haaah.”

“Never mind that, I’m worried about that laundry I forgot to take in… Aaah!”

“What?!”

“That thing you just said! ‘By the light of the setting sun’ in the morning? Doesn’t that seem off?!”

“Man, you’re slow!” “Shut up!” “Go home!” “Lam off!” “Lam!” “Lam?!”

“Honestly. They’re playing around like little kids…”

Ignoring the rowdy chaos of the boys, Nice spoke to Jacuzzi calmly.

Her glasses aside, between her eye patch and her scars, Nice really didn’t look like an upstanding citizen. However, her mild expression and gentle comportment contrasted so strongly with her appearance that she seemed kinder than she actually was.

“Listen, Jacuzzi. It’s fine; I mean it. He didn’t notice us at all!”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. He looked flustered…almost like he was running from something…,” she told him, remembering what had happened a short while ago.

For a moment, her words almost reassured Jacuzzi, but then…

…he abruptly realized something, and anxiety crept into his expression again.

“Running…? From what?”

“Huh?”

Jacuzzi’s question left Nice unsure how to respond. With a troubled smile, she began searching for an answer.

“Good question. Probably from the police, don’t you think? You know; the radio did say they were after the Russos…”

“I-in that case, wouldn’t Don Placido be the only one the police are looking for?”

“I suppose that’s what it would mean.” As far as Nice was concerned, she’d given a perfectly natural answer.

But it didn’t get the results she expected.

Jacuzzi's already pale face grew even paler, until the color of his tattoo struck a brilliant contrast against his white skin.

"Th-that's awful! Then we really do have to find Graham fast!"

"? Why…?"

As he answered Nice's question, Jacuzzi looked blank.

"Huh? Well, I mean… *Graham went to help out the Russo Family, remember*?"

"…?!"

"That means the police might be after him… So we've got to find him and escape together, right now…"

"…You knew? You knew Graham had ties to the Russo Family?"

As far as Nice was concerned, Jacuzzi's answer was a bolt from the blue.

Just after she'd arrived in New York, she'd done her own investigation into Graham and the other local power relationships, and she'd learned he was involved with the Russo Family. She'd been wary at first but eventually decided he wasn't a bad guy. She'd confirmed the information with him herself, too, so there was no mistake.

Apparently, Graham had been cooperating with them despite the wanted poster the Russos had put out for Jacuzzi. As a result, Nice had decided to trust him for the time being, and not wanting to make Jacuzzi uneasy, she'd kept quiet about the whole thing.

So why did Jacuzzi know?

But Jacuzzi looked even more bewildered at her simple question.

"Huh? Of course I know… Oh, come to think of it, nobody talks about it, do they? Did you muzzle them, Nice?"

"…" Nice fell silent, her face puzzled, and Jacuzzi realized what she was trying to say. He gave an awkward smile.

"Aww, c'mon, Nice. Sure, the Russos are our enemies, but Graham's a good guy. You know that."

"…Is that what's bothering you?"

"Huh? D-did I misunderstand…?"

Jacuzzi was acting worried again. A little chagrined, Nice opened her mouth to speak…then smiled.

"Jacuzzi, I think this side of you is really something."

"I-it is…?"

Jacuzzi lowered his head in embarrassment, recognizing the compliment. However, despite the mood of their conversation, the situation nearby hadn't changed at all.

Bowed as it was, Jacuzzi's head was now easier to smack, after all, and his friends' hands gave him some good loud thwacks.

"Hey, check you out, Jacuzzi. Just rubbin' it in our faces…"

"I don't really get it, but I'll give you crime."

"I'll give you punishment." "In exchange, I'll take your wallet."

"In other words, die, ya Casanova bastard!" "Hya-haah!" "Dammit! I'm jealous…!" "Are Jacuzzi's tears some kind of potion that attracts chicks?!" "Arrrgh! Gimme a few of those tears!"

"How could I—?! Yeeeeeeeep?!"

When they started in with some fairly painful knee kicks, Jacuzzi's shrieks echoed through the station.

"Aah, like anyone would actually cry?!" "Hey— Who was that? Who just kicked him for real?!" "Geez, come on, fella!"

“Who was it?!” “It was you!” “Me?” “Yeah, you!” “Uh, whoops.” “Hya-haw!”

The boy who’d kicked him solidly in the pelvis was shoved out of the surrounding group. Timidly, he apologized to Jacuzzi. “S-sorry about that, Jacuzzi. You can kick us a little to pay us back.”

“Hey, what’s with the ‘us’?”

“Pipe down! If one of us goes down, we all go down!”

Ignoring the whispered arguments of the delinquents, Jacuzzi asked with watery eyes, “Ngh. Nnngh… Seriously?”

“A little. Just a little.”

“Well, I’m sort of too sad to move, so, Donny, you kick them for me.”

At Jacuzzi’s tearful remark, all the delinquents around him froze up.

“Whoa, Jacuzzi, hold up!! No, uh, Mr. Jacuzzi?! I mean, President Jacuzzi?!”

Meanwhile, finding himself abruptly addressed, their big friend responded without understanding the context. “Nugah. Little confused, but got it. Small kick. That okay?”

“DooooOOOOooh?!”

Seeing Donny lumber into motion, the delinquents scattered in all directions like a bunch of grade school kids.

“J-Jacuzzi, you lousy little—! You pick *now* to act like a leader and delegate?!”

“He’s tougher than you’d think!” “Waaaugh!” “Hya-haaaaaaaaaaah!” “Hya-haw!”

As bedlam broke out, a short distance away from the group, a lone girl was looking up at the sky.

It was the young woman who was the cause of this journey: Miria Harvent.

Her features still seemed young enough to count as girlish, and illuminated by the clear light of a cloudless sky, her whole body shone with intense hope.

Miria, who had come to Chicago to meet her beloved, made her wish in a cheerful, singsong voice. As she did, she visualized her sweetheart's face in the sky.

And her wish included the name of the individual she loved so dearly.

"Let me see Isaac soon!"

Children of God. Your petition has been rejected.

However, as if the heavens had grinned and given their unfavorable reply…

…the Chicago sky sent a heavy, piercing roar rumbling through everyone's ears.

"?! Wh-what was that?!"

Amid the uproar on the platform, Jacuzzi trembled even more violently than the rest, concerned about the source of the sound.

"…It was an explosion," Nice murmured calmly.

Her companions all looked around at once— But the people in the station were all reacting the same way they were, or ducking and taking cover, or standing stock-still. There were no visible flames or smoke nearby.

The idea that the bombings might have spread into the city was threatening to set off a mild panic. If smoke had actually been rising anywhere, they might have had an instant riot on their hands.

“Aaaaaaaaah, wh-what’ll we do?! E-everybody calm down! No, we can’t! First we’ve got to run, then calm down, then find Graham and tell him to calm down or we’re all gonna diiiiiie! What do we doooo—? Aaaaaaaaah what should we do?! Calm doooooo— Ouch!”

“*You* calm down!”

His friends Jack and Nick kicked him from the front and back, and all the air left Jacuzzi’s lungs in a groan.

However, unsurprisingly, this wasn’t business as usual even for the delinquents. Most of them were anxious about that noise, and the ones who seemed calm were actually just clueless.

All except for one: a dyed-in-the-wool bomb fiend who was feeling a swirling heat behind her eye patch.

“…The radius was…about ten yards.”

Quietly focusing, Nice had picked up the distant explosion with all five of her senses, then estimated the scale of the huge blast from the state of her surroundings and her past experience.

“About five hundred yards to the west…?”

When a scorched smell from the explosion drifted to her on the wind, she stopped abruptly, midguess.

She realized that it was the scent of *familiar* explosives.

Feeling a cold sweat break out on her palms, Nice opened her left eye—the only one she had—very, very wide.

“These explosives… Why…?”

⟺

A few minutes earlier In Chicago

In the end, I’m on my own.

As he walked past the side of Chicago Union Station, Rail was quietly looking up at the sky.

His hood was pulled far down over his face, hiding his distinctive suture scars in its shadows.

Ordinarily, he couldn't have cared less if the scars showed, but under the current circumstances, he couldn't expose anything that would broadcast his identity to the people around him.

Even after the previous day's set of bombings, he didn't know where Frank had been taken.

Actually, Frank wasn't the only one unaccounted for. Sham had agreed to help yesterday, but Rail hadn't seen him at all since immediately after the Elleson Hill bombings.

As a result, he'd been forced to strike out on his own. He might have been a member of Lamia—an organization that worked directly for Huey—but except for his explosions, Rail had nothing in the way of power.

He didn't seem particularly worried about this, though. As far as he was concerned, running was no longer an option.

The cause of "saving Frank" didn't exist for him anymore, and he didn't know what he should do. A neutral observer might say he'd grown desperate and reckless, and they wouldn't be wrong.

Still, it wasn't a simple matter of abandoning his own safety. At this point, he wasn't able to stop himself. He was dangerous. The bomb fiend no human could stop had become a ticking time bomb himself wandering through town.

What Christopher had said to him the night before last echoed in his mind:

"I'm not sure how to put it… I'm already broken, so I can't put you back together. If you're going to break like we have, I can give you as

much of a hand as you like. But you know, right now, I think you're at a crossroads… I think you need to make this decision on your own."

Decide? What's to decide?

We never had the right to decide how we were going to live, remember?

"I just hope…somebody who's still whole can pull you back from the edge."

What do you mean, "somebody who's still whole"? I…I've never even seen anybody like that. And help from them? That's just…

If you're going to say stuff like that, then I don't mind breaking. Put me back together? When was I ever together?

"You see, if that happens, I'm sure you'll be able to live as a human*, Rail."*

Shut up, shut up!

Why did he say a thing like that?

I don't give a damn about lousy humans.

I don't care if the whole world says I'm crazy.

I just…I just wanted Chris to take my hand and lead me, that's all…

Like a distant observer, Rail watched his feelings bubble up inside him and then disappear.

I think…I've probably thought that way for a long, long time.

I don't feel anything now, though. I wonder why.

Maybe I laughed and cried too much the night before last.

To Rail, everything—smiles and sadness—felt elusive at this point.

The only thing in his heart that was clear and distinct was a gloomy irritation, and he kept himself going by letting that annoyance and anger lead him.

He knew he was doing this to himself, too, which upset him even more.

What is this? What the hell is happening to me?

What do I do if I meet someone when I'm all weird like this?

That won't make anybody happy, you know?

Even if I run into Frank or Chris again…will I stay stuck as this nasty version of me?

If so…I don't care if I'm alone forever and ever and ever.

But apparently God really had it in for Rail: Less than a minute after the thought crossed his mind, someone laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Rail."

"!"

Leaping back involuntarily, Rail shoved a hand into his coat.

The face he saw when he turned around was unfamiliar. The individual wasn't wearing a lab coat like the researcher lady's hangers-on, but Rail definitely couldn't let his guard down. After all, it was more natural to assume they wouldn't be wearing those coats around town than to assume otherwise.

As Rail warily considered the situation, the man gave a tired smile and waved both hands at him.

"It's Sham. Good, I'm glad you're all right."

"Sham! …What gives? Why show up now?"

He'd never seen this guy before, but he was apparently a friend.

Rail's speech instantly reverted to normal, but both his tone and his eyes were completely emotionless, as if they were showing a glimpse of Rail's slow, darkly wavering madness.

It wasn't clear whether the man calling himself Sham noticed Rail's unsettling look, but he pulled him over to the side of the alley and started talking to him, sounding rather troubled. "Well, you see, things have taken a fairly nasty turn…"

"What things?"

"Hilton and I have ended up in a rather unpleasant situation… Oh, I have a message from Master Huey as well; would you like to hear it first?"

"No, I don't, and you can go ahead and tell him to die again for me," Rail responded instantly.

Sham shook his head, smiling wryly. "It's been a long while since you acted so openly rebellious. Well, that doesn't matter. I'm going to tell you anyway… It's from a little while ago now, but he says, 'I'll come to give you orders directly in the near future. I'm looking forward to seeing you, Rail.'"

"…Huh? What's he talking about? He's buried deep in prison."

Huey Laforet, an immortal and the master of Rail's group, was currently incarcerated in Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary, and his hands were all but literally tied.

That was why Sham, Hilton, and Leeza were acting as messengers and relaying his orders to them.

And yet, he'd said he was going to come and issue orders directly, which meant…

"Is that idiot planning a jailbreak?"

"Oh, I almost forgot: When I delivered your message quite a while ago for him to 'go die,' his answer was 'I am an immortal, so I can't die.' And I'm afraid I couldn't tell you anything about a jailbreak."

"…You actually told him to 'go die' from me, verbatim… You've got guts, you know that?"

Rail was speaking as sarcastically as ever, but his conflicting feelings toward Huey churned inside him: the bitterness and hatred he'd harbored for long years, and fear.

And now the mixture of emotion was joining the waves of his irritation.

Aah, what am I thinking? What do I feel about Huey?

This is more trouble than it's worth…

His frustration grew.

Argh. Somehow, I just don't care about anything anymore.

And grew.

Right now…I just gotta blow it up*…*

"Wait— Rail? Why did you take out a bomb?" Sham asked in a panic, and Rail came to himself with a jolt.

He looked at the egg-shaped weapon gripped in his right hand, then realized just what it was he'd been about to do.

"Um, if you're that offended by what I did, I apologize…"

"…Uh, no, sorry. I was kidding."

Rail hastily put the bomb back inside his coat. Now that he was paying attention, he could feel a nasty sweat all over his body.

Ever since his sense of pain had faded from the vivisections, he didn't sweat all that much, either. The researchers had said something about the effects on body temperature regulation, but apparently the symptoms weren't that severe yet.

Cold sweats, on the other hand, were different.

Every time he remembered the various experiments he'd been subjected to, a greasy sweat invariably formed on his palms and his neck.

He could hardly believe what he'd done—he'd even broken out in a cold sweat over it—and Rail felt…nothing, except that slowly writhing irritation.

Vaguely disturbed by the thought that something weird might be happening to him, Rail spoke to Sham to distract himself.

"…Sorry. So what was it again? Why did you suddenly drop off the face of the earth?"

"Well, it's…"

Sham nodded, looking as if he was finally about to broach the main topic—

—but he never finished his sentence.

"Hey, there he is!" someone suddenly called.

"Huh?" Sham reflexively turned, and—

—two men in black were standing on either side of him in the narrow alley.

"Oh no!" Sham seemed to recognize the men. Plainly shocked, he tried to twist around, but…

…before he could manage it, one of the men in black brought out a syringe in his right hand and plunged it into Sham's neck.

"Ghk…?!"

The other man pinned him, and although Sham struggled a bit, it wasn't long before his movements gradually grew duller, as if the drug was kicking in.

"Huh?"

The whole thing had taken only a few seconds, and for a moment Rail just stood there, stunned. However…

The first man pulled the syringe out of Sham, looked at Rail, and muttered suspiciously. "…Hmm? So is this the brat with the bombs from the day before yesterday?"

"Yeah," replied the man holding down the struggling Sham. "Take off that hood and check. If you see scars, it's him for sure."

"Right."

The man with the syringe nodded firmly, then slowly reached for Rail.

This only took a few seconds, too.

But in that interval, a whole mess of thoughts raced across Rail's mind.

Who's this? Why Sham—? A syringe? Black clothes… The mafia? No— They know me? "If you see scars"… What happened the day before yesterday? What…? What…? Whatwhatwhatwhatwhat—? Bombs…Explosions…Smithereens…

They should be— Blew them apart… Twice… Russo… Took Frank… Took…Frank…? …?———? —……

———!

As Rail's thoughts made sparks in his mind, the image of the group in lab coats and the bespectacled woman at the center of it swelled and burst into nothing.

In the next instant— He'd taken the bomb he'd almost put away back out of his coat, and his fingers were heading for the pin.

"Hey! He's—!"

"Hold it! If you detonate that here, forget this guy, you'll go, too—"

The alley was narrow, and he was far closer to his targets than he'd been when he blew up the woman in the lab coat and her entourage.

It was obvious to anyone that if he used a bomb here, none of them would escape unharmed.

However—

Aah, I wonder what these guys are saying.

It's no good; I can't get it into my head.

I'm so mad. I'm so mad. I'm so mad.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah—

He was screaming furiously in his mind, but inside the hood, his face was cold and blank.

Then, with no hesitation, no pause, no attempt to even try to get any distance, he yanked the pin out of the grenade.

Through his drugged haze, Sham saw the sight at the exact same time as the men in black suits who were holding him down.

As they focused on the egg-shaped object that had been slowly tossed at them, all three gulped simultaneously.

Consequently, right before that object exploded—Sham realized something.

Rail couldn't see anything around him anymore.

Not the life of Sham, his companion.

Not the men in black, their enemies.

Not even his own life.

As the roar and the heat and the light stole his vision—Sham, who had stayed conscious in another body, was certain of one thing.

It was…

…Rail was already beginning to lose his mind.



A few minutes later

In the midst of the smoke and the clamor, a wail echoed through Chicago no different from usual.

“Aah, wh-what thick smoke. We might die just from breathing it, so we need to hurry up and run! C-c’mon, I mean it, Nice, it’s dangerous; you really shouldn’t go closer…”

“I’m sorry, Jacuzzi. There’s something I need to check!”

When Jacuzzi’s group arrived at the smoke-filled scene, the rubberneckers who’d gathered at a distance were gazing into an alley that was probably ground zero for the explosion.

The police and firemen hadn’t yet raced to the scene, and due to the possibility of a secondary explosion, nobody had set foot in the roiling smoke of the alley.

Amid the chaos, Nice pushed her way through the onlookers and plunged unhesitatingly into the alley.

Jacuzzi followed her, crying all the while about how dangerous it was. After him, a group of unapproachable-seeming delinquents entered the alley.

The onlookers watched them dubiously, but no one considered following them. As a result, the first ones on the scene of the bombing were a group of delinquents who’d just returned to their hometown— And thus the confusion grew even more.

“I knew it. The smell of this smoke… There’s no mistake.”

“Y-you’re right, Nice, this place is dangerous for sure! Let’s hurry and go back!”

As Nice, murmuring to herself, headed deeper into the alley, Jacuzzi responded with a virtual non sequitur.

The residual smoke made for poor visibility, and the one-eyed girl looked carefully with her remaining eye.

Something… Some kind of clue… I’d settle for a fragment of the bomb…

Nice examined her surroundings, trying to identify the exact location of the blast, but—

—suddenly, she noticed a small figure moving farther down the alley.

“H-huh? Somebody’s walking this way…from over there.” Jacuzzi seemed to have noticed it at almost the same time. Uneasy, he focused on the approaching figure.

The shape was clearly unsteady, walking as if it might collapse at any second.

“A child?” Nice muttered to herself. Sure enough, the figure appearing from the smoke belonged to a young boy in gray clothes.

His face looked heavily scarred, but what caught their attention more was how much red was covering it.

“This is awful! He— He’s hurt!” Despite his previous fright, Jacuzzi was the first one to run over. When he got close to the boy, coughing from the smoke, he hugged his shoulders and asked him in a shaky voice, “A-are you okay?!”

The boy stayed silent. The doll-like eyes in his bloodied face gleamed vacantly.

It wasn't clear whether Jacuzzi's question had gotten through to him or not. The emotionless eyes gazed at Jacuzzi, Nice, and the group of delinquents who'd come after them, but then…

"Got…to go…"

"I-it's okay; we'll get you to a hospital right away!"

Jacuzzi gave the best smile he could muster, doing everything he could to set the boy at ease. Still, his expression was trembling, and the delinquents watched the scene unfold with some trepidation.

"Got to go…blow them up."

"Huh? Wh-what? What's the matter?"

Jacuzzi hadn't quite caught the boy's murmur, and as he held the child's shoulders, he involuntarily responded with a question.

He decided getting the boy to a doctor came first and tried to take him away, but just then, the kid seemed to register Jacuzzi and the others for the first time.

"Mister…? Who are you people?"

"Oh, uh, um… Don't worry! No worries, so don't worry!"

Jacuzzi wasn't thinking clearly, so his murmured reply didn't quite make sense. Ignoring him, the delinquents were checking the path to the alley's mouth and seeing whether there were any other injured people.

Before long, they spotted what appeared to be police officers and firemen approaching from the far side of the alley, and Jacuzzi and Nice sighed with relief.

However, just then…

…the boy, who was watching the policemen approach with vacant eyes, muttered something strange.

“Don’t…get in the way.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t…get in the way!”

Jacuzzi and the other delinquents thought the boy was just confused, but—

—Nice noticed *it*.

The boy had slipped his right hand into his coat, and she saw him pull out a small round object.

Then—his fingers went straight to the silver pin protruding from it.

“…?!”

Was it fate that Nice had been the one to notice, or was it inevitable given they were at the site of an explosion and she was already on high alert? There was no way to know.

But one thing was certain—if she hadn’t been the one to notice, the following event would have most likely resulted in fatalities.

Her instincts, backed by long experience, created an instantaneous, extreme spike in her blood pressure.

Not good.

The boy’s movements, that shape, the color, the mood, her instincts— All of them were warning Nice of danger, and that alarm made her sure of one thing.

This scarred-up boy was the culprit behind the explosion.

And what he was holding was a bomb.

But in the very moment she realized all this, the kid pulled the pin out of the “egg.”

Immediately, Nice ran up to the boy and snatched it away from him.

“Wha—?! N-Nice?!”

Ignoring Jacuzzi, Nice immediately scanned her surroundings—then flung the object as hard as she could into the deserted depths of the alley.

Please don’t let anyone be back there…! she prayed silently, then screamed at her companions.

“Get down!”

That was all.

At her shout, the policemen who’d been heading toward them from the mouth of the alley stopped, wondering what was going on… But they didn’t duck and cover right away.

However, one of them did notice Nice’s extremely unique appearance, and she heard him mutter, “I-is that—Nice?”

Oops.

As Nice hit the deck herself, she inwardly cursed in irritation.

When she was a child, she’d often triggered bomb scares in this area and ended up in custody. They’d let her go since she was a kid, and because there hadn’t been any injuries or real material damage, but naturally, in the process, her profile had become fairly well-known around the station.



How could she have run into one of those people who recognized her here, of all times and places?

“Hey, were those explosions yesterday your—?”

Nice had seen the question coming a mile away, and she bit her lip and denied it tersely. “No, sir, they weren’t! Never mind that—please just get down!”

As if to say there was no time for further explanations, she was already lying on the ground.

Meanwhile, the delinquents were operating on a certain conditioned reflex.

And that reflex’s “condition” was plain and simple.

Nice was telling them to get down.

Nice, a true bomb fiend, was giving them the crystal-clear command to get down.

That could mean only one thing.

In the past, they’d been through this again and again.

And they’d learned.

The delinquents had learned what Nice’s words meant not with their memories, but with their bodies— And on reflex, they all hit the dirt, bracing themselves for the inevitable result.

“Aaaaaaaaah?!”

A little later than the others, Jacuzzi screamed and covered the boy’s body with his own, and in that instant—

—the second explosion of the day screamed mercilessly through the alley.



Turn back the clock just a bit.

Miria had reached the scene after Jacuzzi's group, anxiously watching the alley with the crowd of rubberneckers.

"I hope they're okay…"

Just as she'd tried to follow them into the alley, the police had arrived, and then it hadn't been possible for the onlookers to enter the site anymore. Miria thought the police would probably chase Jacuzzi and the others back out right away, but—

—immediately afterward, a violent explosion echoed from within the alley.

The rubberneckers screamed and scattered, getting away as fast as they could.

Miria stood dazed for a little while, but before long, she came to herself and remembered that Jacuzzi and the others were still in there.

"Oh no…!"

She made for the alley where she'd heard the explosion, running upstream in the scattering crowd.

As she did, a huge cloud of smoke billowed out of the alley's mouth. The police officers and firemen who'd just raced to the scene seemed to be in an uproar as well.

Miria wove her way through, trying to get to the alley, but—

—from within the unusually large cloud of smoke, she saw a huge, familiar figure running toward her.

"Donny!"

As she called the enormous Mexican man's name, Miria realized he was carrying two people over his shoulders. One seemed to be Jacuzzi, judging from his clothes, and the other figure was the size of a child.

There were several children in the group of delinquents, so she worried that one of the kids and Jacuzzi might have gotten hurt.

However, Nice was running alongside Donny when she spotted Miria. She grabbed her hand and kept going without even attempting to explain.

“Huh?!”

Miria didn’t understand what was happening at all. Pulling her along by the hand, Nice raced breathlessly through the smoke.

“Oh, good…! I was afraid we’d get separated… I’ll explain all of this later. Right now, we’re getting out of here!”

Overwhelmed by the tension in Nice’s face, Miria obeyed without protest.

As Miria watched, Nice took a single cylinder with a threadlike string on it from the pouch she wore on her hip. She yanked the thread out with her teeth, then threw the object behind her without looking back.

A moment later, there was a light pop and the *whoosh* of escaping air. Glancing back, she saw a wall of smoke expanding with incredible speed.

When she looked, the other delinquents were also scattering, fleeing under the cover of the smoke or mixing with the rubberneckers and generating mild chaos.

Miria had seen this exact same thing a year ago at the mansion on Millionaires’ Row. Nice apologized somewhat guiltily after throwing the smoke bomb.

“I’m sorry, Miria. I really wish this hadn’t happened…”

After checking behind them to make sure they weren’t being pursued, Nice slowed down a bit and let go of Miria’s hand.

For her part, Miria was now sure that they were all fleeing from something, and she asked about it directly.

“What happened? What’s everybody running away from?” she timidly inquired.

Nice smiled weakly, a little embarrassed. “Um, well… From the police.”

“Huh?!”

Miria was bewildered. Nice’s wry smile grew more self-deprecating, and she sounded weary as she continued.

“One thing led to another, and…

“…if nothing changes, they’ll probably assume I’m the culprit behind the bombings.”

Interlude II: The Twisted Soul Stays Cool and Calm

Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary Special underground cell

Roughly a minute had passed since Ladd had laid out all the Shams.

Firo was sighing over his predicament, while Ladd had put a finger to his temple in apparent thought. Suddenly, he clapped his hands together, then turned a brilliant smile on Firo.

“Okay. Well, you take your time and think, Firo. I’ll finish these fellas off.”

“Why would you do that?”

Firo’s gaze sharpened in protest, and Ladd looked mystified as he responded.

“‘Why would I do that’? Why *wouldn’t* I do that? I’m a murderer, technically, and if you’re askin’ whether it’s okay for me to off these guys for no reason, well, I figure it is, ain’t it? I ask myself, and of course the answer is yes! Don’t even need to think about it! Every part of me agrees… Which makes it a yes, right? Ain’t that right?”

“It’s *murder*; of course it’s not okay! You couldn’t call this justifiable self-defense by any stretch. If you kill these guys here, you won’t just be doing more time. You’ll be going straight to the gallows.”

“The gallows, huh…? Say, do you suppose executioners way back when ever thought they wouldn’t get killed, since they were the ones doing the killing? Or were they always on edge wonderin’ if it’d be their number tomorrow? Which do you think it was? Huh? Which one?”

“Dunno. It doesn’t matter.”

Ladd was rambling about something irrelevant to their current situation, as usual, and Firo was at his wit's end. He started wondering what he should do with the eyeball squirming in his right hand, but then…

"No, no, Firo, listen. It's important, all right? This is a very pertinent problem for me now. See, I've got the right to slaughter these guys, no questions asked, this very minute. But if I play God and deliver a glorious death to somebody who's out cold, what emotion is that going to plant in me?"

"I couldn't possibly tell you."

"Well, yeah. I've never just up and killed a fella who's sleeping before. It's like an adventure. If I end up thinkin' I'll never die, like I'm some kinda god, I won't be able to make any excuses for myself." Firo had answered indifferently, but Ladd kept yammering away with far too much excitement. With no attempt to hide his unusual level of energy, he asked, "What about it? What about you, Firo? You ever thrashed a sleeping guy to death? You ever had an overwhelmingly, outstandingly, phenomenally, exceptionally, positively, absolutely superior upper hand and thought, 'Hey, I'm gonna kill this guy, so maybe that means I'm gonna die'?"

"Of course I—"

But he couldn't say he hadn't committed such a murder.

Needless to say, Firo hadn't had the experience personally. However, he did remember it.

Among Szilard Quates's memories, there was one from a certain ship, more than two hundred years ago.

It wasn't something he wanted to remember, but as memories tend to do, it surfaced in his mind in response to little things whether he summoned it or not.

In the dead of night, he was standing beside a bed, extending his right hand toward the head he could see in it, and—

—he wished he could forget the sensation that followed.

The one who'd been absorbed into his right hand back then had been…

Maiza's…kid brother.

Immediately after he'd absorbed him, he'd seen a flashback, memories of yet another person's life.

As he recalled the memory within a memory—Szilard's experience of Maiza's brother's memories rushing into him—Firo realized that he was clenching his own right hand into a white-knuckled fist.

"Oops. Dammit."

When he remembered he was holding an eyeball, for a moment, the sheer creepiness of the idea almost made him drop it. But if he let go, it would be sucked right back into Huey's body, lying at his feet.

"Hey, c'mon, don't crush that thing. Hey, actually, how are you planning to take that home with you anyway? They've got this prison-island locked up tight. They've even got their eagle eyes on the lookout for stuff like single hairpins. I'm real curious how you're gonna get that eyeball past them. Are you going to swallow it or something? I think somebody said human eyeballs are pretty tasty; want to give it a few good licks? Or are you going to chew it up until it's a squishy mess and see what the inside tastes like?"

"Don't be sick! Who the hell'd eat an eyeb—"

I've eaten a human.

The moment he tried to argue back, Firo remembered the sensation of Szilard getting sucked into his own right hand, the influx of all sorts of memories into him, and he unconsciously fell silent.

“…? What? You’ve been acting weird for a while, you know that?”

“It’s nothing.”

Firo heaved a big, dramatic sigh, then set to work distracting Ladd from the “weird” behavior he’d just pointed out.

A short while ago, Ladd had said he’d come to kill Huey.

Firo’s behavior had told him there was a way for immortals to die.

The day Firo let Ladd in on the cannibalism method, Ladd might very well say, “Okay then, I just have to starve you until you can’t take it anymore, then tie your right hand to Huey’s head!” And he wouldn’t just say it; Ladd was very likely to actually do it.

On top of that—he might declare that he was going to kill other immortals as well.

No matter what, he couldn’t let this bloodthirsty maniac learn their secret.

Remembering the faces of Ennis and Maiza and his other friends, Firo filled himself with determination.

Just then, as if he’d sensed Firo’s rising resolve…Ladd stopped dead, then murmured, kicking the guard who lay at his feet.

“So getting down to business. That immortal lying there next to you, and other immortals like you—not that I’d kill you, but, well…”

“…”

“How would a guy go about killing them?”

Firo had been expecting that question, and he answered it with a thin smile. “You think anybody’s dumb enough to tell a murderer how to kill him?”

It was a clear, simple response, and Ladd gave a single pensive nod. Then he twisted his lips into a brutal, distorted smile.

“You said it, pal! Good answer! If I was a vampire, I bet I wouldn’t tell some yahoo off the street about how a stake through my heart would kill me! Actually, the only people who’d pull a stunt like that are fellas without a care in the world, who think they’re absolutely invincible…
Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah dammit, dammit, dammit to hell!”

“?!”

The change was incredibly abrupt.

Ladd suddenly flew into a rage, took a running jump, and punched the wall with all his might.

…With his unrefined, yet finely made, solid iron prosthetic.

He seemed to use the movement of his shoulders, hips, and entire body to control his pure metal hand, but the motions themselves looked like a typical blow to an opponent’s side.

There came a loud crash, and—

—cracks fissured up the wall, and he saw that the iron arm had sunk deep into the stone.

“…!”

If a human head had been there, it would probably have ended up in worse shape than a tomato after a run-in with a cow’s hoof. Forgetting for a moment that he was immortal, Firo felt a thrill of terror of that power run through him.

Punching was an incredibly simple action.

The more normal the person, the harder it was for them to imagine the pain of being shot or slashed. Since becoming immortal, Firo had been pumped full of lead and slashed in the throat, suffering lethal

damage more than once, but he was able to register that pain as something to fear only because of his own personal experience.

However, what he was seeing now was far easier to understand than those had been.

If that hits you, you will die. The horrifyingly direct reality set off an alarm in his brain that was much more comprehensible than guns or bullets.

But the alarm stopped ringing almost immediately.

“Eyeeeaaaaaaaargh! Ow! Ow, ow, dammit, owwww!”

When Ladd pulled his arm out of the wall, he started to roll around on the spot, clutching his shoulder and his neck with his flesh-and-blood right hand.

After about three revolutions, he twisted around and stood up again, smiled brightly at Firo, and muttered, “That hurt like hell… Did I break my collarbone or something? Dammit, when I get out of here, I’ll have to be sure I’ve got some morphine on me before I land this punch on anything! Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Uh, wait. What are you doing?”

Firo had had no idea why Ladd did that, and now he was watching him with astonishment. The electric bulb was still swaying slightly, casting an uncanny light over the two men and all the fallen shapes. It sent a small, unsettling chill through him.

Nothing about this situation was normal.

He wanted to get out of there as fast as possible, but Ladd was whispering a perfectly easygoing apology. “Ah, sorry, sorry. Real sorry about that. I feel bad; didn’t mean to startle you! It’s just, y’know. I just remembered this super-stupendously, utterly maggoty, insanely sick-making bastard I know!”

“Did you kill that guy, too?”

“Nah, couldn’t do it. He almost killed me, actually. So now he makes me twice as sick as before.”

“…?”

There’s somebody out there who could do that?

The guy in front of him was definitely funny in the head, but his skills were the real deal. Even if Firo had a knife or a machine gun on hand, Ladd would be a real headache to kill in a straight fight.

Well, it’s a big world, Firo started to think, but—

“Yeah… That damned conductor… Next time I see him, he’s gonna pay. I’ll give him a million dollars’ worth of pain and regret and suffering and sadness and some feelings I can’t even describe! I’ll grind him into a pulp!”

“Hmm?”

The word *conductor* niggled at Firo slightly.

“Maybe it’s weird for a murderer to say, but this fella was a real loony all the way down to the last hair on his head… I don’t get it, but he was sayin’ something like, ‘The whole world is just some dream I’m seeing, so I’m gonna last forever’!”

“…”

Uh-oh. Firo kept quiet, but a waterfall of cold sweat was running down his back.

A conductor.

Stronger than Ladd.

“The world is a dream I’m seeing.”

“I’ll last forever.”

Those few words were all he had to go on, but Firo knew, with more certainty than he'd ever felt about anything, who it was.

It had hit him so hard that he nearly yelled in spite of himself that he'd just discovered what true conviction felt like. Everything he had—his own memories, experience, and instincts—made him positive about that conductor's identity.

"In the end, I never even got his name, but hey, if I check up on the conductors on that train, it won't take long to figure out who he is. Say, Firo, does any of that ring a bell for you? The train was the Flying Pussyfoot."

"…"

"What gives? You've been real quiet for a while now."

This guy…

Several bits and pieces of information flickered through Firo's mind.

1931.

The train Isaac and Miria had come back on.

The day Czeslaw Meyer, who had become something like a little brother to Firo, had arrived.

And…the day a certain train had been erased from existence.

He was on that train…?!

The Flying Pussyfoot.

The train had been scrapped after the end of 1931, and rumors of all kinds of trouble hung around it.

Isaac and Miria had gone on and on about a monster and robbers and terrorists, but as usual, Firo had taken their story with a grain of salt.

Still, considering how the train had been treated afterward and the weirdness around its arrival, it did seem to be true that something had happened.

He'd tried asking Czes about it, but the kid had just gone white as a sheet, like he was about to cry. Firo hadn't been able to bring himself to press the issue.

He'd decided that topic was probably best left untouched, and after a little while, he'd forgotten about the train, but…

Who'd have thought everything would connect here?

Sensing something eerie in the coincidence, Firo chose an answer and carefully began to speak. "No clue… I do know a few conductors, but I don't bother asking about the trains they've been on."

"Right. Well, yeah. Yeah, I guess you wouldn't."

Ladd didn't seem particularly disappointed. He nodded, grunting in agreement, and then the grunts shifted into humming as he jauntily picked up the rifle at his feet.

"Well, on that note, it's about time I finished these fellas off—"

"Seriously, why?!"

"Relax. After considering all the angles, I decided I'm gonna wake them up, then kill 'em nice and slow."

Firo shook his head in dismay. Then he marched up to Ladd and snatched the rifle away from him, using his left hand. Up until a moment ago, Firo'd been wary about even going near him, but as they were talking, he'd become convinced that Ladd really wasn't hostile toward him.

Ladd let him take the gun without a fight, then protested with a wry smile.

“C’mon, now, stealing my piece? Y’know, this isn’t doing anything for your image. Well, I can beat people to death bare-handed. What about you, Firo? Bet you’re one of those types who doesn’t like the feeling on your hands… No, that ain’t it, is it?” Looking at Huey’s body, behind Firo, Ladd smiled cheerfully. “We’re different types of people, you and me, but we’re still on the same side. Ain’t that right?”

Firo set the rifle down on the chair, then turned to face Ladd again.

“How should I know? Dammit, talking with you feels even less like a conversation than talking with Isaac. I mean, are you sure about this? You’ve gotta think about…uh…that special someone of yours.”

“Lua.”

“Yeah, Lua. They’re holding her hostage, right? Don’t you need to make sure she’s okay?” Firo asked.

Ladd’s smile abruptly vanished. After a few seconds of silence, he began to explain his own reasoning, looking serious.

“Well, I coldcocked these guys on pure adrenaline back there, but… I’ve got my reasons for thinking Lua’s fine, even if they are a little vague.”

“Like what?”

“When I asked ’em if Lua was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, these rotten perverts said ‘For the moment.’ Remember?”

“Yeah, they did. And?”

Firo didn’t understand Ladd’s reasons at all, and he waited quietly for his answer.

“You think anybody could look at Lua and think she was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed?”

“…How should I know? I’ve never met her.”

“When we get out of here, I’ll introduce you.”

Well, guess he’s calmed down for now.

Relieved that he was finally able to think about what to do next, Firo brought up the main subject again.

“So what do we do about this?”

“Hmm? Well, I told you my calling is to kill the guys I can kill, so it’s better if I get that done for now, right?”

This guy is hopeless.

The slump in Firo’s shoulders was obvious, but Ladd didn’t seem to care; he was busy scanning the room.

Glancing down at the twitching Shams on the floor nearby, the murderer took a step toward them. However, Firo quietly shook his head.

“I said it before, and I’ll say it again: Don’t. These guys are prisoners and guards. They’ll never let you out.”

“Yeah, I know that. So… Not these guys.”

“?”

“Let’s say I take my time killin’ the guy whose eyeball you dug out.”

He started forward, stepping over the body of the Asian man…

…and his next step took him toward the small, unconscious figure lying in the corner.

“For now… I guess I’ll start with the one that probably isn’t in the prison records.”

“?!”

Nothing about her suggested she was anything but a young girl. Ladd had brought her into the room with him. Firo had never seen her before, but—

“Hey, waitwaitwait!”

His voice rose angrily, and he grabbed Ladd’s shoulder, stopping him.

He didn’t know who or what the girl was. She was probably the “fairy” that Isaac had mentioned hearing the other day, but either way, she was a kid. She could technically be an immortal or a homunculus, but in this situation, he couldn’t check.

“Hunh? What? You can’t kill kids?”

He wanted to scream *Of course I can’t!* but he kept telling himself to stay cool, and he managed to stop the shout before it escaped. Instead, he expressed his thoughts with sarcasm.

“…I dunno. If a kid came at me on a battlefield with a gun, I might. But I won’t kill one who isn’t resisting, and I’m not letting you do it, either.”

“You’re mafia, right? What if your boss ordered you to?”

“I’m not mafia. I’m Camorra,” Firo replied, keeping his voice low. “And I wouldn’t pledge my loyalty to a boss who’d give an order like that.”

“You’re soft. Soft, soft. A real cream puff,” Ladd answered with a short bark of laughter. Looking at Firo not with mockery, but actually a bit of respect, he muttered, “That’s fine. Those kids might kill you ’cause you didn’t kill them first, but you see that. You’re the type that recognizes that and is still ready to die.”

“…”

“I like guys like you. Even if you are immortal. But that bastard conductor I told you about— Get a load of what he said to me! ‘If a kid came at me with a gun, sure I’d save him. After all, I’m strong enough to dodge without breaking a sweat even if he shot at me from behind’!”

Seeing that Ladd was clenching his fists and grinding his teeth together, Firo looked away uncomfortably.

Yeah, I bet he would say that.

As Firo thought, Ladd was remembering the conductor who'd once overwhelmed him and put Lua in mortal danger. His face had been dyed red by the blood of his victims, only dimly illuminated by the predawn light, but he remembered his voice and his expression and his murderous intent—everything.

Firo saw Ladd's mouth twist viciously, and he frowned, at his wit's end.

Just then—Firo's right hand felt a light shock.

Huh?

When he looked over, one of the guards had gotten up before either of them noticed, grabbed Firo's right arm, and stolen Huey's eyeball right out of his hand.

Wha—?

He'd had a good, solid grip on the thing, but the guard had jabbed his fingers firmly into his hand; he felt something like an electric shock, and the strength drained out of his fingers.

"Well done. For now, your job is finished."

Even though the man's nose was bleeding, he gave a composed smile and dropped Huey's eye into a jar he'd taken from who-knew-where. Inside, the eye tried to climb up the glass, its blood vessels wriggling like slugs, but he clapped the lid on so tightly it couldn't even ooze out through a crack.

"Why, you…"

Seeing that one of the men had gotten up, Ladd took a step forward, planning to deck him again— But then he abruptly stopped, glaring at something near Firo's shoulder.

"?"

When Firo turned, wondering what was up, he realized that the little man had a rifle trained on him from below, pointed at the back of his skull.

"…Hey…," Firo murmured with a look of protest as the little white man slowly edged backward.

Even then, the muzzle of the gun stayed fixed on Firo. The small man spoke to Ladd, though it was unclear whether he was being sarcastic or sincere. "Well, you certainly showed me. You far exceeded my expectations."

The black man and the Asian man were beginning to get up as well, but unlike earlier, the guard was the only one speaking.

"Now then, we have a problem on our hands. How am I to convince you that we're serious about having a hostage?"

"Start by askin' Lua what her favorite flower is, then tell me."

"That's not possible."

"…The hell does that mean?" Ladd asked in a low voice.

In response, Sham quietly shook his head. "At the moment, there's a little trouble at the location where she's being held. Under the circumstances, I'm not able to ask her any questions. Don't worry; it isn't that she's unable to talk."

"…"

"Let's see… After the trouble's blown over, I'll be sure to ask. For now, I'll excuse myself. At the moment, I'm not at liberty to dispose of you two."

“Oho. You’re talking like you could get rid of nobodies like us pretty easily. That’s a real gas, sayin’ that while your nose is leaking blood, pal. Only I can’t laugh at all, can I? What’s up with that? Huh? I can’t let you get away with tellin’ funny stories that don’t make me laugh, can I?”

At Ladd’s unfair remark, Sham sighed with a wan smile.

Firo watched them tensely, unsure what to do. It would be easy to take the rifle from the little white guy. But if he did, would he trigger a repeat of the earlier situation? In that case, he decided, his first priority was watching how things developed and getting Ladd to settle down.

“The way you talk bears a slight resemblance to Graham’s style. Just what I’d expect from sworn brothers.”

“…”

At the sudden mention of his sworn kid brother’s name, Ladd ground his teeth again.

Watching him out of the corners of their eyes, the Shams began sidling toward the door. They were about as cautious as they could get, as if they were walking through a minefield, and all that nervous attention was focused on Ladd and Firo.

“Oh, as an aside, do refrain from mentioning this to Huey.”

““I can’t have him finding out yet, you see.””

“““Understand that I am always in possession of hostages.”””

“““““Ladd is one thing, but you’d have trouble with that, wouldn’t you, Firo?”””””

With that mean-spirited parting shot, the four Shams who’d regained consciousness gave them the exact same smile.

After the Shams had gone—all except for one guard, who was still lying in the doorway—Firo asked Ladd a question, sounding mystified.

“Hey… I know you didn’t forget that I don’t die. Why didn’t you hit him?”

“Did you wanna get shot?”

“…No.”

“Then it’s for the best, ain’t it? Not liking pain is just as important as refusing to die. The only difference is that you can steel yourself for pain to survive it, but death comes whether or not you’re braced for it.”

I see… No, hold it.

For a moment, Firo almost let himself be convinced. Then he remembered the atrocities of a few moments earlier, and he frowned. “When they took that Lua girl hostage, you slugged them like it was nothing.”

“I told you, didn’t I? I believe in Lua. Not that I don’t believe in you, Firo, but we just met, see?” Chuckling, Ladd seemed to channel his frustration with the Shams into amusement instead and asked Firo teasingly, “Besides…if they’ve got a hostage over you, too, they might start givin’ you orders: ‘Kill that guy over there.’ If that happens, and you’ve got a hostage to stress over, what are you gonna do?”

“…”

He couldn’t give an instant answer.

The idea hadn’t even crossed his mind, but it was a possibility if you thought about it.

Once you sensed a useful advantage, you could use it as often as you wanted. Turn your fallen opponents into stepping stones.

It was the natural order in underworld society, where he lived, and a common occurrence even in everyday life.

If I was in Sham's shoes, if things went south… No, if it was me, I'd do it even before they went south.

He didn't like using hostages, but his line of work wouldn't let him be so fastidious. Precisely because he knew this, he was angry at his own foolishness in not thinking it through to that point.

Firo had already gouged out the eye of a man he had no real grudge against. If they'd used Ennis and the people of New York against him as hostages again, what would he have done?

Here in prison, there was no way for him to check on what was happening outside.

However, the knowledge Firo did have made him painfully certain that the being calling himself Sham really could do something to Ennis and the city's residents.

So here in jail, I'm just his pawn and that's it?

…Me? A camorrista?

Dammit… What am I supposed to say to Maiza and the capo masto*?*

Seeing Firo hesitate, Ladd swiveled his head. His gaze went to Huey, who was still lying on the floor.

"You got lucky, you late-blooming Peter Pan. The priorities on my kill list just shuffled around a bit." Smiling cheerily, Ladd took his bloodlust and locked it away. "I guess Neverland won't fall for a while yet."

Ladd wasn't pulling himself back under control. He was simply and genuinely boiling down his malice. When his breathing had calmed, he turned to Firo and shrugged.

"I tell you what, this is a lousy age we're living in. Am I right?"

“What’s lousy about it?”

“These days, you need to reconnoiter and strategize just to slaughter a guy who’s right in front of you.”

Firo thought about what that meant for a moment, then heaved a big sigh.

This guy seriously makes no sense.

It hadn’t been long since they’d met, but Firo knew that he not only couldn’t, but mustn’t, understand what sort of man Ladd Russo was.

Ordinarily, he probably would have wanted to steer clear of him entirely, but under the circumstances, that wasn’t an option.

As a matter of fact, Isaac was about to be released at this point in time, but Firo hadn’t included Isaac in his count in the first place. This was less because he felt Isaac was useless than because Firo didn’t want to drag him into this.

I never want to hear Miria cry like that again.

But no matter what Firo thought, the murderer who was now his one and only collaborator among the inmates squeezed his iron left hand tightly, very tightly, and let his shrinking intent to kill carry his thoughts to the end of their course.

“Well, this sure got interesting. This is *real* interesting, ain’t it?”

“Don’t ask me.”

Ignoring Firo’s curt response, Ladd kept right on letting his excitement build.

“In that case… This has been a real shot in the arm, and I’m not gonna waste it. I’ve got to use my own hands and make things way, way, way, way, way, way, way, way, way, way more fun!”

“Do whatever you want.”

“Yeah! I will! That’s my duty by myself to me!” And I bet it’s fate, too, don’t you think? Ha-ha! …Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

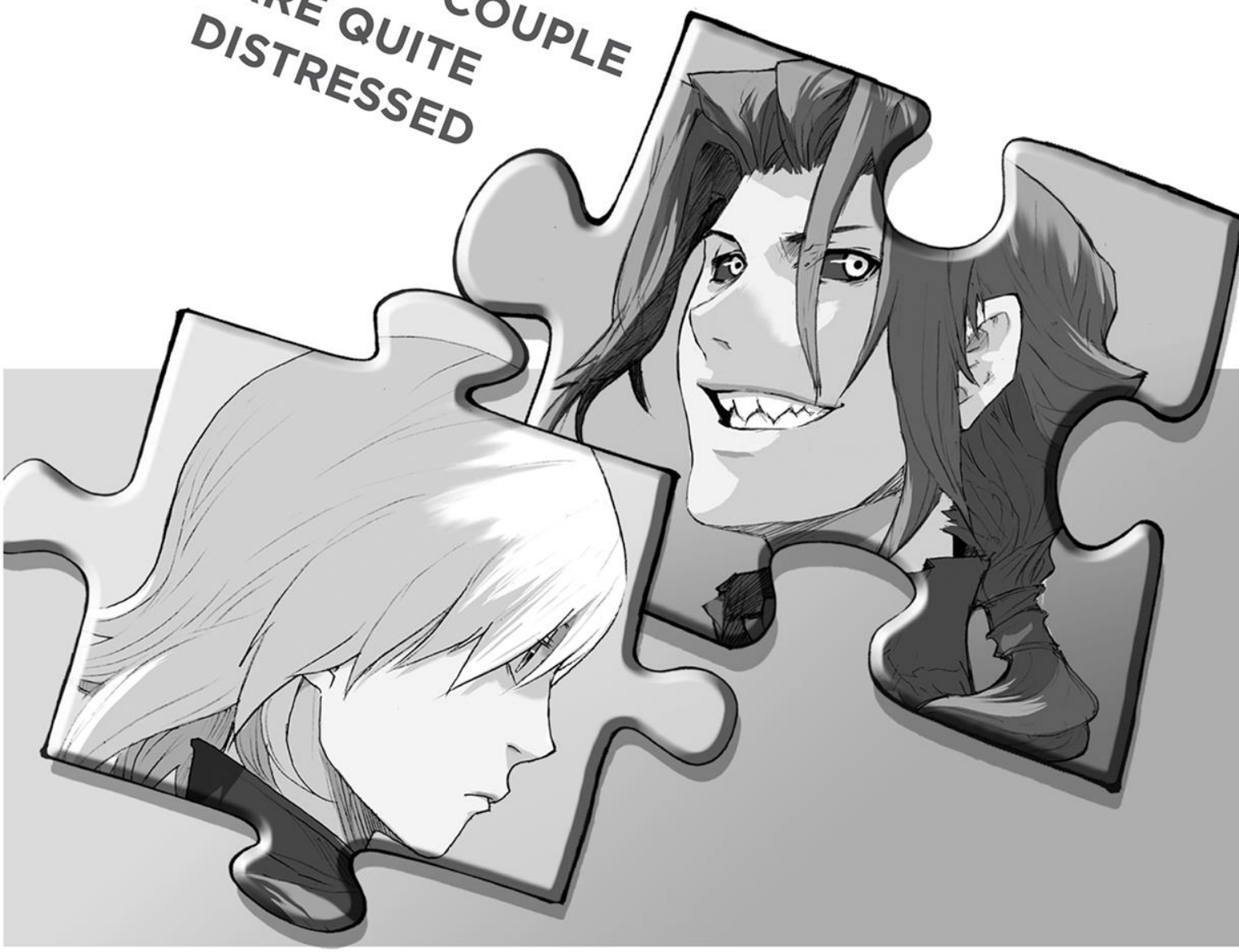
Ladd’s roar of laughter echoed underneath Alcatraz.

However, Firo was the only one who heard it, and as he listened to that maniacal laugh, once again, he remembered the position he’d been placed in.

Up until now, it had been only a vague impression. Now, though, it took on a solid shape— And inwardly, once again, he put what he’d understood into words.

This is a real mess I’ve gotten myself dragged into.

CHAPTER 3
THE ELDERLY COUPLE ARE QUITE DISTRESSED



CHAPTER 3: THE ELDERLY COUPLE ARE QUITE DISTRESSED

Chicago The bar Dolce

For Chicago and its jostling skyscrapers, the district was a relatively quiet one.

In the back of a bar that seemed rather run-down for its size, the old couple who owned the establishment were taking a moment for themselves before opening for the day.

“Did you hear the news, dear? There was another explosion this afternoon.”

“Yes, the young delivery fellow was talking about it a minute ago. He said this one was actually here in town.”

“We shouldn’t open the bar today.”

“Oh, now, there’s no need to be so fearful, don’t you think?”

The husband laughed off his wife’s grave warning.

However, the unease in the old woman’s face didn’t fade at all.

“I have a bad feeling about it.”

“That again… You always get those right when something big is happening. There was that time a few years back, when we were going to take that trip to New York. You know, that train… The Flying Pussyfoot, I think it was? Right when we were about to board, you said the same thing out of the blue, and our whole trip was shot.”

“Yes, and I still think I was right.”

“Poppycock. There was nothing in the papers about the train being in an accident or anything. We checked.”

“Still… They say that train was scrapped right afterward, don’t they?” the woman insisted.

The proprietor shook his head wearily.

It was true that his wife’s instincts were often correct. Even so, right after those bombings, she was probably more anxious than she should be.

After all, today was a big day: the bar’s thirtieth anniversary.

They weren’t holding a proper celebration or event, and they hadn’t put out any advertisements. They were simply savoring a modest sense of achievement and pride for themselves. Even so, to them, the day was more than worth commemorating.

The proprietor had been looking forward to it for quite a while now, and he persisted in his attempts to placate his wife.

“Look, those explosions yesterday were probably just an accident because of somebody at Nebula. It’s just like ten years back, remember? That *tomboy* Nice—looked like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth—she was always triggering bomb scares. I bet these are just the same.”

“…Come to think of it, I haven’t seen those children for a few years now.”

“You know, it must’ve been two or three years since I saw them myself. Well, those juvenile delinquents must be pretty close to adulthood by now. Maybe they settled down a bit and moved to some other town.”

As he said it, the proprietor realized that line of thinking might not help his argument, and without missing a beat, he began trying to talk her around again.

“You see? If we want that bunch to feel safe about coming back home in a few years, we can’t close the shop over petty little worries. Right?”

“Don’t try to distract me, dear,” she retorted sharply.

The proprietor looked a little guilty and drew back slightly. “W-well, it’s all right. Let’s just turn away anyone suspicious or anyone with big bags or packages. That should do the trick, shouldn’t it?”

“…Do be careful, all right? I mean it.”

Ultimately, the wife gave in. After he watched her disappear into the back to begin prep work for the kitchen, the proprietor exhaled deeply, then went outside to open the bar.

It was an extremely simple operation: All he had to do was flip the sign that hung out front from Closed to Open, and today, the establishment’s thirtieth anniversary, would begin just like every other day.

…However.

When he opened the door and went outside, two customers were already there, waiting for the bar to open.

“Oh, my apologies! We’re opening right now!”

It was unusual for an establishment that opened after the sun had begun its trip down the sky to have customers lined up and waiting.

One was a whiskered man who wore his hat pulled down low over his eyes. The other was a beautiful young woman in an elegant gown. They didn’t appear to be lovers. They could have been a father and daughter, or siblings, or simply work colleagues.

And… The striking pair seemed familiar to the proprietor.

“Sir, miss… You visited us yesterday, didn’t you? Well, come in, come in! Regulars are always welcome!”

“…”

“Ohhh… How am I to express the delight etched into a human brain? Eternity is a series of moments, and all creation is a single sculpture depicting many, trapped in Fate’s wheel… If the face of a clock is an eternal wheel that imprisons time, then perchance the wheel that imprisons Fate is the very world reflected in our eyes.”

The elderly man welcomed them to the bar without giving it much thought, and the woman entered wordlessly. The man in the hat followed her, babbling on about something peculiar.

As he watched the muttering man’s receding back…



…the proprietor paid no particular attention to it. Gazing up at the blue sky, he confidently flipped the sign.

In the end, that act would decide the fate of both bar and owner.



Chicago On the street

Under that same clear blue sky, Graham Specter was being his usual self.

“Let me tell you a story that sounds sad but is actually a mysterious tale of the bizarre, except for the fact that it really is just sad…”

“Too long. Break it up, all right?”

“Let me tell you a sad, sad story.”

“Is every thought in your head based on the assumption that people will inevitably listen to your stories? You are, after all, taking time out of someone else’s limited lifespan to make them listen to you talk. I’m not picking up that kind of good faith in your words, Mr. Graham. Do you know what ‘good faith’ means? If not, that’s the saddest story there is. ’Specially your head.”

Beside Graham, Shaft—the underling who’d very nearly reached buddy status—was making foolhardy comebacks. Several friends trailed after the two of them.

For his part, Graham and his boundless energy were on a pessimistic spiral at the moment, flipping the huge wrench he held once, catching it with a smack, and very meekly accepting Shaft’s criticism.

“Listen… Listen to my sad story…”

“Now I’m sensing even less good faith… Are you mad, maybe?”

“I’m not mad. All that’s welling up inside me is sadness, and sorrow, and more sadness, and anger… Hmm. There is some anger there.

What a sad story! Apparently, I can't even identify my own emotions instantly anymore! What should I do to overcome this sadness? How can I verify my own emotions? Through action, I bet. Right? Meaning my duty is to communicate my feelings to the world and to myself through actions that are three parts sadness and one part anger… More concretely, I'll say 'sad' three times while I hit you with an angry attack, Shaft. I'm so sad! Aah, life is sad!"

"Huh?! …Hey, wait just a— Your anger and sadness aren't balanc… Bwugh! …!"

After Graham whacked him with a wrench-style body blow, screaming all the while about how sad he was, Shaft hugged his stomach and fell silent as he walked along.

Paying no attention to his buddy's groans, Graham seemed rejuvenated after that, and the happiness and sadness flipped.

"Okay! Now that the buttinsky is quiet, that sad yet mysterious story can wait until later! First, a fun story! Today, Shaft says he's going to show us a great, little-known place to fill our bellies! Of course, as the one introducing us, Shaft is responsible for everything, so if it turns out to be lousy, we'll hold him liable! In other words, he's picking up everybody's checks!"

At this extremely unfair remark, a light chorus of cheers went up from the friends behind them.

All except for Shaft, who was gripping his stomach in a greasy sweat.

"…! *Koff…!* Hey, no, nobody said anything about…!"

"Wow, you're back already? Guess I didn't hit ya hard enough—I'd like to go back to anger, but I'm not really a fan of resorting to violence, so I won't. That's right—if I'm being honest, that was revenge for calling my head sad. Aah, I swear on the sky to come clean! My bad, Shaft! You just really ticked me off with that one!"

“…Never mind, just pay back words with words, at least.”

“I’ll do my best. So whereabouts is this place?”

Graham didn’t look the least bit repentant. Shaft shot him a cold glare, but then he heaved a deep, resigned sigh and indicated the road up ahead with his chin.

“Uh, it’s up this way a bit.”

“It’s a bar that usually opens right about now, and their food’s pretty good. The place is called Dolce. Ever heard of it?”



Somewhere in Chicago In a car

“Take the next right after that. Then go straight for a while.”

“Sure thing.”

A red-eyed man responded amiably to the blunt instructions from the passenger seat.

Humming, the chauffeur kept driving for a little while—and then he noticed the scowl on the face of his young passenger riding shotgun. He grinned.

Neat rows of teeth showed between his lips, but, unsettlingly, all of those teeth were canines.

“What’s the matter, Ricardo? You’ve been acting odd since this morning.”

“Those bombings yesterday… What do you think of them, Christopher?”

“I’m one hundred percent convinced it was Rail. This sure has gotten interesting.”

“*Interesting* is not the word I’d use.”

Sighing, Ricardo Russo spoke to Christopher Shaldred, an eccentric chauffeur-slash-bodyguard-slash-(technically) friend.

“You think literally nothing of the chaos Rail is causing?”

“Well, I just told you what I think—it’s gotten interesting. If you wanted to drag more out of me, I might say ‘Hey, way to go.’”

“You’re not going to stop him?”

“Not if this is the answer he chose. Besides, I think it could be a way to save Frank,” Christopher replied bluntly. Ricardo fell silent, looking rather dismayed.

After stealing out of the house during yesterday’s uproar, they’d been wandering around the city with no particular destination in mind.

According to the radio and newspaper coverage, Ricardo’s grandfather, Placido Russo, was a suspect in the bombings and disappearances.

Placido was currently missing, as were several of his executives, and several more had been arrested. However, there had been traces of a gunfight and explosions at Placido’s mansion as well, and apparently, until they could take the missing man into custody, the situation was at a standstill.

“Come to think of it, the news hasn’t mentioned that group in the lab coats at all, has it?”

“They might have tremendous influence. Maybe they’re a unit that reports directly to the President of the United States or something.”

“I don’t think the country’s in such dire straits that the president would consider using a bunch of weirdos like them.”

For a short while after that, silence fell in the car until Christopher asked a tactless question.

“Well, you hated your everyday life, and now it’s shot to hell. How does it feel?”

“…I don’t think I’ve quite processed the feeling yet.”

The question had been insensitive, but Ricardo didn’t look particularly upset. That was just the kind of person Christopher was, and over the course of their year together, Ricardo had become completely used to it.

Plus, despite the official answer being “I haven’t processed the feeling yet,” Ricardo had in fact accepted the current situation without much fanfare at all.

“It’s just a hunch, but I get the feeling Grandpa may already be dead. That means the Russo Family is finished. There’s no reason for you to force yourself to stay with me now, Christopher.”

“Aww, come on. People don’t need reasons to be friends, do they?”

“I’m impressed you can say something so embarrassing with so much confidence,” Ricardo answered brusquely before turning to the subject of Rail again. “But you’re friends with that Rail kid, too, aren’t you?”

“More like family, actually.”

“Then you should take better care of him. You don’t have to stop him, but you could go help him.”

“Mm, I did technically say I wouldn’t stop him if he wanted to come with us, though. Besides, I get the feeling that helping Rail won’t do him any good in the end.”

“Don’t people usually act for the sake of friends or family without thinking about it so much?”

“What about your grandpa?”

At yet another insensitive comment, Ricardo fell silent for a while, though the silence wasn't born of discomfort. *Maybe I'm able to take a good hard look at myself because Christopher's not the type to tiptoe around your feelings.* With that rather mature thought, Ricardo took a slightly different tack. "Maybe this is a pot calling the kettle black, but that kid's a little odd. Somebody needs to keep an eye on him."

"If that's what you think, then you shouldn't be so cold toward him, Ricardo."

"…I wasn't really. I was just acting the way I always do. If anything, it felt more like he didn't like me," Ricardo answered sullenly.

Trying to hide his delight, Christopher softly replied, "No, no, I'm positive you'd hit it off. If you fight, it's because you're too similar."

"Give me a break. Exactly what about us is so similar?"

"Quite a lot, actually. First, for example, the way each of you is jealous of the other because you're afraid of losing me."

"Oh, so you're just way too full of yourself," Ricardo shot back.

Ignoring that, Christopher continued calmly. "And then there's the way you hate the world. And the way you still can't completely reject it."

"I'm not rejecting it, particularly."

"It would've been funnier if you'd blushed and shouted 'That's not true!'"

"Getting angry over nothing just makes you hungry. And *you* were the one who wanted to get something to eat while we thought about what to do next."

No sooner had Ricardo spoken than, as if on cue, *her* stomach growled.

“My, my.”

“…”

“Oh, did I detect a fleeting hint of embarrassment?”

She is a girl when it comes to things like that.

Unusually for him, he tactfully decided not to make that remark out loud.

Ricardo looked like a boy at first glance, and she lived her life pretending to be one. She hadn’t told him why, but since only a few of the people around her knew the truth, it was possible that Placido had been exerting some sort of pressure to keep it under wraps.

However, Christopher hadn’t said anything about it.

For her part, Ricardo hadn’t pressed Christopher about the lack of questions…and so far, the two of them had spent their time together treating it as a nonissue.

After her stomach growled, Ricardo kept her silence brief, then resumed acting as their navigator. “Oh, take a left there.”

“Roger that.”

“Once you do, it’s just up ahead.”

“Hmm. I’ve never gone this far out to eat before. Is the place that good?”

Christopher might have been eccentric, but he had fairly discriminating taste buds.

He had a particular weakness for sweets and desserts, to the point where he found himself dissatisfied with the flavor of store-bought madeleines. Instead, he baked his own, and Ricardo—along with Rail, Chi, and Huey before them—acknowledged that they were excellent.

Ricardo, who knew the taste of those madeleines, had said she knew of a “hole-in-the-wall with great food.” Christopher’s hopes were rising a little as he asked her where they were going.

Unusually, Ricardo’s expression softened a bit when she answered.

“Yes, it’s delicious. The same couple has been running it all by themselves for about thirty years. The apple pie is a masterpiece of a dessert. And so, I thought I’d have some today.”

“Huh. I’ll be looking forward to that… Why today?”

“Well, we don’t know what’s going to happen from here on out.

“This could be the last thing we eat in Chicago.”



At Dolce

“The sense of taste is the eyes and brain and ears and heart of the tongue. In the sweetness rolling across my palate are the dreams of the one who made it; in the saltiness spreading through the darkness between closed jaws, I sense the life of its creator, past and future; in the savoriness crushed out by violently gnashing teeth, I hear the groans spilling from the heart of its maker, and I close the whole of it in my throat and ponder. Delicious, delicious—if I may enjoy this moment, I care not whether I am pierced by ten thousand sins whilst my lips thus speak a single word: ‘Yum.’”

“Shut up and wait.”

The man and woman were creating a peculiar atmosphere around the bar where they sat with their odd conversation.

In addition to the ordinary bar-type counter, the wood-grain interior held about half a dozen tables.

The bar's layout and size appeared just a little smaller than a saloon one might see in a Western, but the sedate wood flooring was just one element contributing to an overall modern look.

It didn't seem to be all that popular. At this point, they were the only two customers, and the interior felt a little too spacious.

And within it, one of the customers kept delivering a strange soliloquy. The situation was atypical, but the elderly proprietor just kept smiling and polishing glasses.

"No, no. I'm not a learned man, so I don't really understand what all those words mean, but I almost feel guilty hearing so much praise."

I don't think he's exactly praising anything.

Sighing over the proprietor's remark, the woman closed her menu and addressed him. "Get us two orders of something filling. Anything's fine."

"In that case, how about some barbecued ribs?"

Said to be one of America's best-known foods, barbecued ribs were also a hallmark of Chicago cuisine.

Historic figure Carl Sandburg was a poet in the true sense of the word. His talents were multiple and varied—in addition to being a poet, he was also a singer and a record-setting author who would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize. In a collection of poems he'd published previously, this man had bestowed several nicknames on Chicago.

One of these was "Hog Butcher for the World," indicating the remarkable development of the livestock industry in Chicago.

Pork ribs were cooked in a sauce that included ingredients like garlic, ketchup, and vinegar, yielding a uniquely flavored meat dish. Together with the fragrant aroma of the meat, the dish further highlighted the city's history.

Even if the seasonings and ingredients were the same, the flavor changed completely, depending on the order of the steps used to prepare them and the use of temperature during the process, and they were considered a good way to judge the skill of individual restaurants.

“Sure. Two orders, then. Kansas City–style.”

“Coming right up!”

The woman’s answer sounded relatively masculine, but the proprietor didn’t seem to see anything wrong with this and smiled at her.

After the proprietor had gone to relay the order to his wife in the kitchen, the woman spoke to the man in the hat next to her.

“So? What now, Poet? We waited a whole night, but there’s still been no contact from either Sham or Hilton. What are we going to do now?”

“In the darkness obscuring the next step, the golden snake’s lone copper scale twinkles bright and tempting. Rat-tat-tat! Should we knock jauntily on that weakened scale, life will be as the lingering whispers of the peerless slug, the traces that mark the path along which it has crawled, wherein gold coins dropped by the modest strawberry will…”

“Enough. I got it—you don’t know what we should do, either,” the woman muttered, fed up, but the man she’d called Poet shook his head theatrically.

“‘The phrase which should be rendered as “I do not know” is a form of resignation,’ murmured the pale seaweed floating in the twilight. However, in the end, it is only illusory nonsense that soon vanishes. ‘Our only alternative is to wrest our path from the clutches of obscurity by ourselves,’ cried the bird swooping through the dusk. Am I wrong, Sickle?”

“I don’t even need to think about it. What I have to do is look for Rail and Frank,” said the woman called Sickle, squeezing her glass on the counter.

Larva was a working unit that reported directly to Huey Laforet. Lamia, a subunit of Larva, was made up entirely of peculiar individuals. The woman was a member of that group, and she was troubled by the situation that had been unfolding over the past few days.

They’d assembled in Chicago, just as the instructions Sham had relayed had told them to do. That part had been fine, but ever since, they’d encountered nothing but completely unforeseen trouble.

Their bad luck had begun with the discovery that a group who appeared to be mafia was on the hunt for them, complete with a wanted poster. A man in coveralls who seemed to be involved with that mafia outfit had started some trouble with them—and they had ended up having to make a run for it.

To make matters worse, Rail had gotten separated from the rest of the group, and when they’d stormed the Russo Family—the mafia behind the wanted poster, as far as they could tell—they’d walked right into a counterattack launched by a mystery group in lab coats. In the ensuing chaos, Frank had disappeared as well.

The next day, they’d gone to see what state the Russo Family was in, but the syndicate’s boss had vanished, and between that and the late-night gunfights and explosions, the place had been swarming with cops.

That explosion was probably one of Rail’s bombs, but…

Sickle had guessed that this was the case, and the following day, an even bigger bombing had occurred. She could sense Rail’s influence there as well, but she couldn’t do anything else, and time marched ever on.

At this point, her group couldn't launch Huey's experiment even if they wanted to— Not to mention they hadn't even been told the specifics of what the experiment was.

They should have gotten that information from Sham or Hilton, or possibly Leeza. But at present, all three were incommunicado.

Irritated, Sickle drained her glass and pushed back her chair, creating an unexpectedly brisk-sounding rhythm, and stood up.

"I'm gonna hit the john."

Ever masculine, the woman in the gown left her seat.

Wordlessly, the Poet watched his companion go, then waited alone in silence for his order.

Then, just as the door to the women's bathroom at the back of the establishment closed…

…several men entered the bar to take her place.

The Poet was pondering what to do next, and he didn't pay much attention to them. In a way, this also decided their fate—and that of the bar.



One minute earlier On the street

"That's it over there, Mr. Graham."

On seeing the quaint bar Shaft pointed out, Graham spun his wrench with delight.

"Oho… Looks pretty old-fashioned, but that ain't a bad thing… I bet that place would be worth breaking… Wait… What did I just say?! I'm going to break a place I'm just about to eat at?! My God, apparently my destructive impulses aren't going to let me eat! What the hell have I done?! If I die, those very impulses will die along with me, and

yet…! It's not fair… Why don't I have a choice in this slow and gentle suicide?! Can such a horrible story exist?! Why do I have to hate the impulses welling up inside my own heart?!"

"If you hate them, then hurry up and get rid of them."

"If I could, I'd have done it already… Hang on. Come to think of it, I've never actually tried. Son of a gun. Guess my hate was so strong that I lost my cool! Now that I've forgotten to challenge myself, what's even waiting for me? Oblivion?! The past doesn't suit a forward-thinking dreamer like me… Right, I have to kill it now! Kill what, you ask? This hatred inside me, that's what! Aah, aah, what a sad story! Where do I have to go to settle this fight between me and myself? For now, all I can say is I'm sorry I said your bar looked like it would be worth breaking, bar people…"

Graham's unbroken stream of words would have made any normal person want to run if they heard him. But his friends seemed to be used to him, and they just kept smiling, if wryly and wearily.

"We're here, so be quiet when we get inside," Shaft muttered with a sigh.

Complying with his request, Graham set the end of his wrench against his lips and held his breath.

Seeing this gesture—perhaps cute or perhaps creepy—Shaft heaved another big sigh. Then he pushed open the door of the establishment, hung with a sign that said Dolce.

Inside, the bar was still quiet. A man who wore his hat low on his head was sitting at the counter, and he was the only customer.

"Afternoon. Can we get something to eat?"

"Yes, come on in! Now, we just opened for the day, so you may have a little wait…"

"Sure, that's fine."

“In that case, right this way!”

The proprietor seemed to be in an excellent mood when he poked his head out of the kitchen, then showed Graham’s group to a table at the back.

Graham had stayed silent the whole time, following his friend’s instructions, but after he sat down and gazed at the menu for a little while, his lips moved slightly.

“…Barbecued ribs, Carolina-style.”

“Oh, I’ll get some, too. Is that good for the rest of you fellas?”

The others nodded, and Shaft called the proprietor over and began placing their order.

After he saw the smiling proprietor disappear into the kitchen, Graham propped his wrench against the wall beside him and took in the interior of the establishment.

“This is really more of a restaurant than a bar.”

Just then… As Graham’s eyes wandered restlessly, his ears picked up an odd mutter.

“An empty belly…is a sorrow that devours the silence of the stomach.”



After Sickle had left her seat and the Poet was alone, he decided to begin his deliberations regarding their next steps by thinking about himself.

Now that they weren’t able to get instructions from Sham and Hilton, he believed they needed to have a better understanding of themselves in order to figure out what they should do.

He’d organized the thoughts he’d had over the past few days, and he was currently running over the threads that seemed most coherent.

Huey’s research institute, Rhythm, had given him eyes that reflected light in a special way.

By making eye contact with someone, he could destabilize their mind.

Then he performed a kind of hypnosis, manipulating their mind to a degree; it was the ability he’d been granted. As a homunculus, he had another ability—he didn’t age—but that wasn’t much use for anything except living a long time, so he excluded it from consideration.

Even the Poet didn’t know when he’d been given these eyes.

They’d been his for as long as he could remember, and he hadn’t asked either Rhythm or Huey about them.

They palely reflected the surrounding light, using the delicate twitching of his eyeballs to forcibly trigger a hypnotic effect in anyone he made eye contact with.

He drove his target into a state of semiconsciousness, then planted suggestions in them.

In other words, the Poet’s eyes were equipped with a power resembling the effect of a candle flame or a crystal pendulum swung before the eyes, condensed several dozen times and amplified.

However, he didn’t understand the effect in concrete terms, and he’d never tried to.

It was similar to how people didn’t really understand why their eyes could see things in the course of their everyday lives.

That said, unlike regular humans, even he wasn’t able to control these eyes of his.

Naturally, if he kept them closed, he could curb their power, but that would interfere with his day-to-day life. He'd determined that he didn't have the resolve to live mostly sightless.

Anyone who met his eyes instantly became more susceptible to the words and situation around them. If somebody screamed at them to die, even if the subject didn't die right then, that word would be carved into the depths of their mind—and one day, something could conceivably trigger a loss of control.

He was aware of this, and so he'd used a bizarre manner of speech and exaggerated gestures to lower himself to a mere oddity.

He didn't stand out much, the way Christopher did. Instead, he evinced his outlandishness in something other than his appearance—his words—so that his companions and the people on the street around him would think…

…No way am I lookin' that guy in the eye.

He prayed that they would simply avert their own eyes.

Laughable, isn't it. If I could use this power incessantly, I'd be able to keep my pride, and yet… The Poet's meditations continued. *Am I a coward after all? Is that why I can't be so decisive?*

Or does the fact that I'm not human act as a brake of sorts?

His group, Lamia, was made up of nonconforming individuals known as homunculi.

They weren't people who had banded together thanks to their unique abilities or physical attributes.

They had merely been chosen and created by some sort of will—if God did not exist, by whatever will the phenomenon of chance could be said to possess.

This was true of Christopher, and Chi, and himself.

Leeza alone struck him as being a bit unique, but she was probably the same deep down. She oozed the pride of someone who considered herself to have been specially selected. It wasn't like Rail's conviction that homunculi were greater than humans; it seemed to be the product of personal circumstances that affected her alone.

And…many of his fellow homunculi pretended, like him, to be broken.

It was likely that, by intentionally creating distance between themselves and the world, they were trying to get used to the unpleasant fact that they weren't normal. Chi's clothes and Sickle's speech and behavior were probably notable examples of this phenomenon.

Once, when the twins had told him about a homunculus by the name of Ennis who was living a normal life, he'd been quite jealous.

What laughable creatures we are.

The figures of his missing comrades Frank and Rail rose in his mind, and he thought, simply:

They're still young.

They haven't gone completely mad like Christopher, nor have they come to terms with it as I have.

I would like them to walk a happy road, somehow.

…Assuming such a road exists.

In the end, he'd been unable to search for that road himself, and so his days of avoiding the issue by feigning insanity dragged on.

He believed that if he obeyed Huey's orders, at least, he'd be safe.

He kept lying to himself, telling himself that that was the most peaceful way.

What on earth can beings like us do in such times…?

As his train of thought reached its end, the Poet felt his stomach come very close to growling, and he began to speak at length to stir his insanity.

“An empty belly…is a sorrow that devours the silence of the stomach.”

He’d spoken this way for so many years, and it had eventually become second nature to him.

However, the Poet understood that it might simply be an act, since he could speak normally if he tried, and his words alone continued to flow without pause.

“It swallows its tears, raising its queries to hunger, the whispering conversation of instinct and emotion, through its vulgar echoes alone. If appetite is the pragmatic god that governs human existence, then we, unable to struggle against that deity, unaware of what it is to doubt, merely continue to fervently bow our heads… Gloom! Gloom! We simply offer our faltering questions to the walls of a living enclosure of flesh! ‘The stinging bee falls. It drowns in honey, falling into a sea of rose thorns,’ we lament with great pity. I realized that the stinging bee was me only after I had chewed up everything in my mouth…”

With Sickle in the bathroom and unable to offer any comebacks, the Poet simply went on smoothly reciting all the hunger-related thoughts that came into his mind.

There were new customers behind him, but he knew no one was listening, and even if they were, they’d find him too creepy to approach. As a matter of fact, that was the whole point… Or so the sensible part of the Poet’s mind thought, but…

…suddenly, a blue shadow appeared next to him on the right, reaching out to slap a few coins onto the counter.

“Owner, get this artist a tequila.”

“…?”

Wondering what was going on, the Poet frowned, turned his eyes in that direction, and—

—the next moment, he froze solid, through his spine and all the way up to his hair.

“…?!”

“Let me tell you a story about a man impressed… I’m impressed. Who’d have thought I’d get to hear a swell poem like that one here in the middle of the city?! What are words, anyway? Right, words are beauty itself! Polish ’em up enough, and just hearin’ ’em can touch your very soul… Yeah, I’m impressed! Right now! Your little yarn swept me into a vortex of deep emotion!”

As the man shouted, he gripped the Poet’s hand and shook it energetically up and down. The Poet watched him wordlessly, dripping with cold sweat.

Those vivid blue coveralls.

That bright blond hair.

The peculiar hairstyle, with the bangs that hid his eyes.

And this hopelessly hyperactive way of talking.

The Poet had only been a bystander back then.

From behind the crowd, he’d simply watched this man…

…fight Rail, Sickle, and Chi in mortal combat.

……This is bad.

Had he realized who they were? His own face hadn’t been described in detail on that wanted poster, but it had referred to him as “a

dramatic speaker." Had he stumbled onto his identity because of that?

Wait, did he know we were here in this bar in the first place? Or is this just a coincidence?

If it was a coincidence, the odds were absolutely incredible.

True, several shops were closed due to yesterday's bombings and disappearances, but even so, there were thousands of bars and eateries in Chicago.

Of all the places in the city, was it really possible for them to have run into each other here *by accident*?

"I tell ya, today's a wonderful day. My pal just happened to bring me here and I get to run into an artist like yourself! I'm indebted to this day!"

"I don't know what's going on, but congratulations, sir."

"…"

Accepting the tequila that the beaming proprietor had brought him, the Poet tried to fathom the real motives of the man next to him.

But he couldn't even attempt to read this person's expression: His eyes were almost entirely hidden, just as his own were. In the end, he didn't manage to learn anything, and the time was wasted.

"Hey now, you clammed up all of a sudden."

"…Ah, well…"

"Embarrassed? If so, I just did something mean… Obstructing the artistic process is awful rude. If I'd done it on purpose, you could have called it an insult! Aah, sad… How sad! How can I atone for this sin? I know; lemme buy you another drink, all right?"

"No… It doesn't bother me. If I accept the sparks that fall upon me, the beauty of the great inferno they ignite around me may intoxicate

me… After all, the copycat that floats in my glass writhes, revealing the depth of life to me."

"I see! I'm kinda confused, but…I've fallen for your soul. Go on, drink up."

Even if the man hadn't realized who he was, when Sickle came back, he'd find out then and there. Not that Sickle would stay quiet anyway.

The other day, this man had dislocated her right ankle and the joints in her arm with his wrench.

An ordinary person would have been hurting too badly to walk, but Sickle and Chi had popped their joints back into place immediately afterward, and they seemed to be enduring the pain through sheer grit.

Naturally, the ache was still there, but Sickle wasn't letting it show in the slightest. He was terribly impressed with her toughness.

But I expect she's angry with this man…

While the Poet's nervousness continued unabated, the man beside him stood up, restlessly.

"…Whoops. Well, I hope you take your time and polish your craft. I think I'll go tell somebody else about this fantastic encounter I had today. I bet I live today and tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and the day after that believing that this is a way to dispel my hatred! What an incredibly thrilling story this is!"

Then he twirled around toward the men's bathroom, humming as he went.

The men's and women's bathrooms were separate, and their doors faced each other.

The man in the coveralls entered the men's room, and the door shut behind him. At nearly the same moment, the door to the women's

room swung open to reveal Sickle, wearing her usual sullen expression.

That was a close one.

The Poet was relieved, but his relief didn't last long.

"Huh?"

"Hunh?"

"Hey, that's…"

"Wha…?"

"You kiddin' me?!"

The group sitting in the corner of the bar seemed to be friends of the man in the coveralls, and a stir ran through them as soon as they saw Sickle.

And the trouble begins.

They'd probably been watching Sickle and the others fight the man in the coveralls from a distance, like himself.

As a result, even if they hadn't reacted to him, the clear memory they had of Sickle's appearance wasn't surprising.

In that case, was it coincidence that brought them here after all?

The question did cross his mind, but there was no time to think about it now.

"Let's go."

"? Go? Go where?"

Sickle seemed to have registered the men who were watching her and muttering. She shot them a sidelong look and frowned, mystified.

However, with no time to offer a detailed explanation, the Poet took his wallet out of his jacket and pushed several bills onto the counter.

“Beg pardon, barkeep. I’m afraid some urgent business just came up. Will this be enough money?”

At the abrupt proposal, the proprietor’s eyes went wide, but he pushed the money back, shaking his head. “What? Sir, no, that’s not… I mean, yes, we’ve already started to grill, but I can’t take your money when you haven’t eaten.”

“Hmm… I-in that case, it would be a great help to me if you’d treat those men. Tell them it’s my thanks for the drink.”

“But… Are you sure? Really?”

“Yes, it’s fine.”

Perhaps picking up on the Poet’s tension, the proprietor gave him his change from the register without another word.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Sickle asked crossly, but the Poet pulled her along by the hand, wordlessly starting for the exit—

—and at that point, he clearly saw something intangible.

It was the sight of absolutely brilliant timing…

“Huh?”

It was a voice he’d missed hearing.

At the same time, it was one he knew far *too* well.

“What’s this? What’s this, what’s this, what’s this?”

The voice that met them as the bar’s door opened had a childlike quality about it.

Its attitude was similar to Rail’s, but the timbre of the voice itself was far more mature.

The encounter was much too abrupt, and in the shadow of his hat, the Poet's eyes widened. Beside him, Sickle was gaping uselessly.

From the dazzling brightness of the outside world, the spitting image of a vampire had stepped into the gloom of the bar.

Below his red eyes, a mouth lined with sharp fangs was formed into a great smile.

The proprietor was encountering this man for the first time, but his expression upon seeing him was very similar to Sickle's and the Poet's.

And the monstrous man in question said:

"Would you look at that!"

With delight rather than astonishment, he flung his arms wide and gave vent to his joy.

"Fantastic! Phenomenal! If it isn't the Poet and Sickle! Rail told me you were in town, but imagine running into you here! Is this what they call 'family ties' in action?"

""Christopher!""

When Sickle and the Poet called his name, the man looked back and forth between them, beaming.

"Well, well, this is excellent! Who'd have thought I'd just run into you here of all places?! I wonder if I should thank God for it. No, if I put it my way, I suppose it's the guidance of Nature I should thank."

"Aah……aah……"

"After all, I ran smack into you two after I got hungry, so let's offer our thanks to Nature for giving us stomachs that get empty, even if we are artificial. Speaking of, Chi told me something a long time ago: In this country called Japan, they have a belief known as 'worship of the innumerable.' They believe there's a god living in every single

leaf, each rock in the road! Amazing, isn't it? Absolutely perfect for a Nature-loving fellow like yours truly. Still, I wonder… Do you think those gods live in homunculi like us, too? If there are that many of them, you'd think one of them could be here, right? Or perhaps the god of dolls could do double duty as our—"

"Shut up, never mind that, just calm down for one second!"

Though Christopher rambled at an unusually rapid pace, Sickle was clearly the one who was worked up, but once she realized it was him, she asked the biggest question that was welling up inside her.

"I have a lot of questions… Seriously, I have a million things I want to ask you, but… Christopher? Did you just say…Rail told you?"

"Yes…?"

"Where did you see him?! Where is he now?!"

As Sickle's voice rose, Christopher shrugged as if to say, *You haven't changed*. Then, still smiling, he answered her calmly.

"Well, it was the day before yesterday. I rescued him that afternoon; he'd collapsed after some sort of bomb scare. Right now, he's probably trying to blow up one thing or another in his attempt to rescue Frank."

"…?! What do you mean?! Why isn't he with you?! He's gone to save Frank?! He isn't with you?! Do you know where he is?!"

"There's no sense in saying it all at once. I'll tell you everything one piece at a time, so for now, just calm d—"

Christopher tried to calm Sickle's rising aggression, but…

…farther back, he caught sight of a gleaming silver object.

The long years of experience he'd cultivated immediately warned him that this "something" was bad news.

Instantly, he shifted his focus.

For a moment, he mistook it for one of Leeza's chakrams, but though it resembled a silver disc, the object was—a wildly spinning industrial wrench.

Just as Christopher's well-trained kinetic vision latched onto the thing, his right hand instinctively darted over Sickle's shoulder.

"?!"

For a moment, Sickle thought she was about to get punched. She dodged sideways, and next to her ear came a dry *smack*.

On reflex, she glanced in the direction of the sound, and…

…there was Christopher's hand, holding an adjustable wrench.

The sight of the wrench called up a nauseatingly vivid association for Sickle. Every cell in her body reacted, and she spun around to look in the direction it had come from.

And then— She saw him.

A man in bright-blue coveralls, slinking along the floor…

…set his hand on an enormous wrench sitting beside the table.

"Let me tell you a happy, happy story."

His silver bludgeon gleaming, the demon in blue smiled.

Both with delight, and with madness…

"An enemy vanished from right in front of me, only to turn up again. Not just once, but twice! If destiny has led me to a chance encounter with the woman in green—is that what they call the 'red thread of fate'? If so, is it all right if I fall in love with her again? What do you think, owner?"

"Huh?"

Finding himself suddenly addressed, the proprietor desperately tried to make sense of the situation, and…

…timidly, he gave a response that didn't answer the question.

"Erm… Sir, it's dangerous to throw wrenches like that."

"You are absolutely right! …Drat… I got an answer that had nothing to do with my question, and yet what you said was most definitely accurate, owner. What the heck? What is this? What am I supposed to do now? Who gets to give the *ding* that says we have a right answer?! Aah, how strange… Strange and sad… And life really is fun! To think it would send such a coincidence my way…!"

"S-sir…?" the owner uneasily tried, and the man in the coveralls nodded firmly to reassure him.

"Hey, don't worry, mister."

Although what he was about to say was far from reassuring.

"I'll finish this before those ribs are ready."



Meanwhile In a train on the transcontinental railroad

A locomotive was racing powerfully toward Chicago.

It was pulling a standard train, made up of a freight car at the front, followed by a chain of passenger cars from third class to first. On this train, an encounter was just about to occur.

"La-la-laaa. ♪ La-la-laaa. ♪ La-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-laaa. ♪"

In a deserted third-class compartment, a young man was singing merrily.

"Zutta-ra-ta-ta, cha-chaaa. ♪ Pa-pa-ra-paaa-paaa-paaa-pa-ra-ra-raaa. ♪ La-la-lu-lu-lu-la-la-la, ding-tomp-shiiiing. ♪ Zun-ta! Zun-ta! Zun-ta…"

The man was simulating everything, from drums to trumpets and even a xylophone, with his lips. He settled a cowboy hat—which he'd bought with what little money he'd had after purchasing his ticket—

back onto his head, and launched into his song again in the compartment, even cheerier than before.

“Ta-ra-ra-ra-ra! Ta-ra-ra-ra-ra! Ta-ra! Ta-ra! Ta-raaah. ♪”

Gazing at his own reflection in the window, he stopped singing (?) for the first time and asked himself a question.

“Hmm… Maybe I should jazz it up a little.”

Should he add some sort of ornament to the cowboy hat? As he was considering it, the man noticed in his reflection that someone was standing behind him.

“Who’s there?! My friend?!”

As he turned around, muttering something odd, the figure—a youngish man in a suit—shook his head.

“No, this is the first time we’ve met and had a proper conversation. You are Isaac, aren’t you?”

“Oh. So you’re not my friend, then?”

“Not at present, at least.”

“Okay. Can’t say as I know what’s going on, but let’s be friends starting now!”

With that outlandish proposal, Isaac Dian held out his hand.

The man was quite naturally taken aback, but he took the proffered hand gently, with a weak smile.

“That’s really something. You’d make friends with someone you just met?”

“You don’t want to?”

“No, I don’t mind…”

“Then why not?! I’m over the moon right now! At this point, forget friends—I bet I could become family to the whole world!”

Isaac was grinning like a child. The man in the suit withdrew his hand, his chagrined smile still in place, and slowly lowered himself into the seat across from Isaac.

“May I?”

“You certainly may, partner.”

As before, Isaac’s response was just a little off-kilter, but the man in the suit didn’t seem to care. Slowly, he began to talk to Isaac.

“You know, you’re just like everyone says… And no different from what I’ve seen of you so far, either.”

“Hmm? What’s this? You know me?”

“I do. I’ve heard about you from various people, and I’ve seen you from a distance. To make a long story short, I’m your fan. Yours and Miria Harvent’s.”

“A fan?!” Startled, Isaac looked around, then peered intently at the man. “Mine and Miria’s?”

“Yes.”

What the man had said was extremely suspicious, but Isaac’s eyes sparkled like a kid’s upon discovering a new type of butterfly, and there wasn’t a shred of doubt in them.

“Is that right! Well sure, Miria’s as cute as a top Broadway star, so I can see why she’d have fans! …Why me, though? Actually, uh, what do you mean by ‘fan’?”

Isaac’s question was perfectly natural, and there was a hint of warmth in the other man’s voice as he replied.

“Well, you see…I heard about the two of you from all sorts of people, and I was a bit jealous.”

“Really? What sorts of people?”

Isaac was already speaking to his brand-new acquaintance as if he were a friend he’d known for years.

The man in the suit gazed at him kindly, thinking for just a moment before he spoke.

“Let’s see… The members of the Martillo Family, for example. Or Jacuzzi Splot. The Gandor Family…Czes…Miss Eve Genoard… People like them told me all about you.”

Hearing the names of so many old friends mentioned one after another didn’t seem to make Isaac uneasy at all. On the contrary, he sounded impressed.

“How about that! You sure do know a lot of people, fella! And if so, there really is nothing to worry about. Any friend of theirs is a friend of mine, and I know Miria will be happy, too!”

The man gave an awkward, somewhat embarrassed smile, and Isaac smacked his knee as if to say he’d forgotten the most important thing.

“Oh, right. I hadn’t asked your name yet! I can’t introduce you to everybody this way! I’ll settle for a nickname or something, but tell me your name!”

At Isaac’s nosy question, the man thought for just a moment.

Then, with a troubled smile, he began to introduce himself for the first time.

“Yes, I’m—well, I work as a spy of sorts.”

“A spy?! Wow!”

The word should have raised some eyebrows, but Isaac’s eyes were shining like a child’s.

In response, the man seemed to hesitate a bit more. Finally, sighing, he gave his name.

“Well, it is rather like a nickname, but it’s my real name as well, so…”

“I’m Sham. Call me that, if you would.”



Meanwhile Somewhere in Chicago

As Chicago’s auto manufacturing industry had grown, so had the number of factories.

The city was studded with a variety of industrial works, but as the world plunged into the Great Depression, they became the source of all sorts of drama, which then disappeared… And the town was littered with abandoned factories whose drama had ended.

For example, the one that Graham Specter had been using as a hideout. In this city, there were multiple factories that acted as secret bases for gangs and hooligans, and sometimes as mafia bootlegging sites, and their drama was still unfolding.

Prohibition had ended, but bootlegging wasn’t limited to liquor, and even now, many people involved in underground occupations put themselves in that no-man’s-land between dreams and despair.

And among them was a certain group of young delinquents who were already acquainted with both.

The abandoned plant they had used was one of several in a deserted area. However, after an incident involving murders a few years back, the delinquents had made themselves scarce, and afterward, once the police stopped dropping by, it had decayed into a complete ghost factory.

And now for the first time in three years, its lights were on.

There was no welcome for the returning residents—only the smells of oil and rusted iron.

The mood was broken by the cry of one delinquent, which hadn't changed a bit in those three years.

"Aaaaaaaaaaah… Wha…wh-wh-wh-what'll we do…?"

"Calm down, Jacuzzi."

Jacuzzi was crouched down by the factory wall, hugging his head. Gently, Nice reached out for him—but her kindness only made Jacuzzi sadder.

"It's my fault. They suspect you of being a crazy bomber because of me, Nice…!"

"I've always been crazy about bombs, so that isn't a problem! Besides, Jacuzzi, really, it isn't your fault!"

"Yes it is! I'm the one who said we should run. If we'd stayed there and explained this to the police, they might have believed it was all a misunderstanding…"

Jacuzzi seemed so discouraged that he might as well have been regretting his whole life, and Nice admonished him.

"You would have turned over the kid to them instead?"

"Ngh…"

Nice had pointed to the boy lying wrapped in a blanket.

The boy seemed to be much younger than Jacuzzi's group, and he was asleep, exposing the painful-looking suture scars all over his body. His injuries didn't seem to be life-threatening, but Jacuzzi's friends had gone to hunt up an unlicensed doctor they knew.

They couldn't be that optimistic about the health of the mystery kid, but above and beyond that, their current situation was extremely *bad*.

Ordinarily, they could have just left the boy with a doctor and been on their merry way. But if they did that, Nice would still be under suspicion, and they'd also have to live with the guilt of having handed a young boy over to the cops.

That said, this boy was clearly the one who'd caused that particular explosion, so maybe it was a very Jacuzzi-like thing to feel guilty about, but…on top of that, there was another fear.

Once they had arrived back at the hideout, Nice had murmured something after she'd administered first aid to the boy.

"Seeing that explosion up close, I'm sure of it. Well, I was already sure, so…it feels more like I have confirmation."

"Wh-what?"

"The bomb this boy used. It's the same stuff we stole," she said.

"Huh…?" For just a moment, Jacuzzi blinked, staring blankly. The second he realized what she meant, the skin around his tattoo went even paler. "You mean…"

"I mean it's the same as the bombs we stole from the Flying Pussyfoot and sold," Nice murmured darkly. "If they're new, mass-produced explosives, then there's still hope, but…"

Jacuzzi imagined an utterly hopeless situation—namely, the idea that these might be the bombs they'd released into the world.

White as a sheet, Jacuzzi began to tremble.

He was anxious now that they'd gotten pulled into trouble after all.

He was uneasy because of all the unknowns: Who was this boy, and why was he using these bombs? Where were Graham and his group, and what were they doing?

He was afraid of the Russo Family, and hostility toward his friends' killers also smoldered in the depths of his heart.

All these emotions surged around and around in Jacuzzi's head, manifesting as tears and trembling.

There was one thing that hadn't yet reached the ears of this cowardly, persistently frightened young man.

The growing uproar at an establishment not so very far from this place.

…Not yet.



Inside Dolce

The bar was in chaos.

No chairs and tableware were flying; no wounds were being carved into the furniture in the destruction. But compared with the current situation, that might have been more reassuring.

This wasn't the tension of a brawl, but more like the feeling just before two gunslingers staged a shoot-out.

As the air grew progressively more strained, there were just two men who seemed completely oblivious to it.

And they happened to be the ones creating it.

"My, my. If it isn't the imported muscle. What's it been, thirty-five hours and twenty-four minutes or so?" Christopher asked, shaking the tingling arm he'd used to catch the wrench and acting disinterested.

Graham responded with a relaxed smile. "Nope. Thirty-six hours, fifty-nine minutes, and twenty-three seconds."

"Is that what it was?"

"Kidding. I just pulled that out of my ass."

“Hey, so did I!” With a short bark of laughter, Christopher flung the wrench into the air. “Still, it looks like they’re grilling ribs, so I suppose I have to fight you now.”

Without even glancing at the wrench he’d tossed, he coolly extended his hand, planning to catch it neatly when it fell.

Instead, the wrench came down behind him, hitting the floor with a loud clang.

“…One more try.”

Picking up the wrench without looking particularly embarrassed, Christopher began spinning the tool in his hand and finished his thought.

“Heh-heh. Barkeep. Put in an order of ribs for me as well! Memphis-style.”

“Huh?! Y-yes, sir!” yelped the old proprietor, overwhelmed by the momentum, and he fled back to the kitchen.

As he watched him go, Christopher threw the wrench into the air again.

The act meant absolutely nothing, but the atmosphere in the bar tensed as though it was the most important thing there was— Until that tension was nearly shattered by yet someone else who wasn’t very susceptible to it.

“Aren’t you going to order for me, Chris?”

“Ah!”

Christopher’s composed expression changed to surprise, and he turned back to the entrance, completely ignoring all the eyes that were fixed on him inside the bar.

As he did, the wrench he’d thrown landed on his head.

The dull *whunk* came with a “Ghk!” from Christopher. Having cushioned its fall on his skull, the wrench fell more slowly, and Ricardo caught it where he stood right in front of him.

“…What are you doing, Chris?”

“Owww… Um, just a little preprandial exercise.”

Rubbing his head, he turned to face the room again, retrieved the wrench from Ricardo, and jabbed it at Graham in an attempt to regain his dignity.

“Well done, fella.”

“…That’s just like you. Right now, I don’t know whether to laugh or cry.”

“Gah! Is this any time for joking around, you imbeciles?!” Between the two of them, Sickle was furious at being left completely out of the loop.

Before anyone had noticed, the Poet had slipped away from the triangle they formed, and he was currently leaning against the back side of a pillar, keeping himself out of harm’s way.

“Explain all this! You know that monster in the coveralls, Christopher? Who’s the kid behind you?! And where did Rail and Frank go?!”

“Hmm. I’d really love to explain, but…it doesn’t look as if he’s going to let me.”

Christopher was looking at the man in the coveralls. With a series of light smacks, he was spinning a wrench that was about five times the size of the one Christopher had, and looking his way with a weapon-drunk madness.

Then, still spinning the wrench, he launched into a long monologue at Christopher.

“Let me tell you a sad…and disappointing story.”

“Huh. Sure, I’d listen to that. Go on and tell me, if you would.”

“A little while back, I went and made a promise. Just a quick little guarantee meant to set the owner’s mind at ease. ‘I’ll finish this before those ribs are ready,’ I told him. Yes, I promised. I can’t, under any circumstances, betray my own reassurances. As a result, starting now— I intend to take you on with everything I’ve got. For whose sake, you ask? That’s right: for the owner’s sake, and for the sake of my own hungry self!”

“That’s a sound argument.” Christopher smiled wryly as he answered.

Graham gave a satisfied smile, then made an odd suggestion. “If you get it, then scoot over a little bit to the left. My left.”

Christopher frowned for a moment, but before long, he nodded in agreement and slowly stepped through the bar.

“Like this?”

“A little more… Yeah, there, that’s good.”

“”?””

What are they doing?

Almost everyone in the bar was wondering the same thing.

The pair in question were apparently the only two who understood. No one else knew what to do; they just stood there, holding their breath and watching, but then—

—Graham’s lips, twisted with insanity, gave a perfectly straight answer.

“If you’re there, young master Ricardo and the sister in green won’t get dragged into this.”

In the same moment— With unbelievable speed, the enormous wrench sliced horizontally through space.

It flew as smoothly as a disc, with the force of a cannonball.

The silver mass, this pure desire for destruction, was drawn toward Christopher.

And then—

—as he gazed at the incoming silver object, Christopher thought, no more ruffled than usual, *Wow, that looks a lot more lethal than Leeza's chakrams*.

At the same time, the experience he'd cultivated through long years of mortal combat calmly warned him, *If you take that full-force, you'll die*.

Chronologically, it was only a second or two, but the space of that single breath felt very slow to Christopher. He figured he could probably think quite a lot of things. Still, he realized that could turn into his life flashing before his eyes, and he decided not to think anything and just evade on instinct.

Instantly, he launched himself off the ground, attempting to leap sideways.

But he no longer had enough time to avoid it with room to spare.

The rush of air from the spinning wrench grazed his side, and the sensation of death passing right by him set all the nerves in his body on edge.

That said, he did not fall in vain.

As he leaped sideways, diving low, Christopher kicked his legs up hard, *landing a solid kick right in the center of the spinning, disc-like wrench.*

"…Whoops!"

The shock it delivered to his legs was greater than he'd anticipated, but the toes of his leather shoes disrupted the wrench's rotation until it wobbled, losing momentum and bounding straight up.

The one responsible for the feat didn't complete his fall to the ground. Instead, he caught himself on his arms, and then righted himself, like a gymnast on a pommel horse.

At the same time, the huge wrench hit the wall with a clang and bounced almost to the ceiling, slowing even further.

For a spur-of-the-moment reaction, Christopher had managed a feat that could safely be declared superhuman.

In doing so, he'd attempted to steal the enormous wrench—Graham's greatest weapon—and advance the situation to his own advantage, but…

…with his red eyes, Christopher saw a blue shadow flying through his periphery.

"…!"

The gazes of the people around them had all been following the huge wrench as well. Naturally, this included Christopher, who'd been the one to kick it.

But the man who'd originally thrown it was already in motion.

No sooner had he hurled the wrench than Graham had leaped after it, running up the chairs and tables between him and Christopher as if they were a stairway.

Naturally, there was no way he could overtake an object he'd thrown, but…

…the one who caught the enormous wrench as it ricocheted off the wall wasn't Christopher, who'd kicked it into the air, but Graham

Specter, launching himself off his third table in a jump that nearly took him to the ceiling.

Once he had the wrench, Graham kicked the wall in front of him, concentrating the strength in his legs for just a moment in order to change directions, then fell toward Christopher.

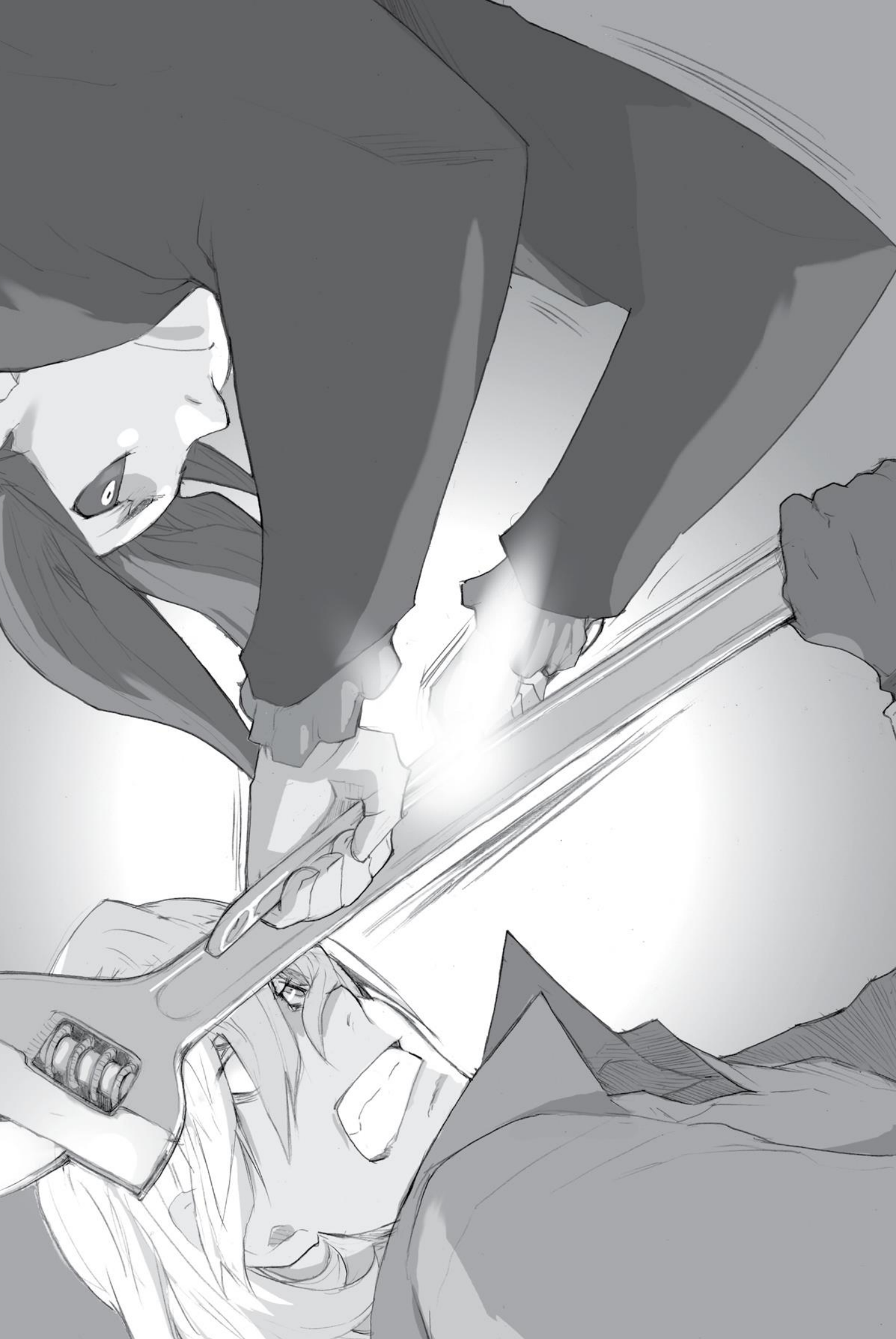
Of course, as he did so, he raised the wrench high over his head.

The one-man offensive was so magnificent that Graham's friends, and even Sickle and the Poet, imagined the sound of Christopher's skull being crushed.

However, the sound that rang out was the whistle of metal slicing through the air.

Sparks scattered.

Christopher had whipped out the small wrench he'd caught a moment earlier, holding it in both hands, and used it to stop the weapon as it swung down on him.



“Hah!” Graham’s eyes widened in astonishment, but he was smiling with pleasure. “So you stopped this attack, huh? …You sure did. Yeah, you stopped it real good!”

In contrast to his hyperactive compliment, he put more and more force into his hands.

“Thanks for that… Hup!”

In response, Christopher also mobilized all the muscles in his body to shove it back.

As they pushed at each other fiercely, they ended up eye to eye. The situation felt a bit like two samurai warding each other off with their sword guards, but the difference in weapon size made it more of a battle between a *jitte* and a pole sword.

“I’ll be honest here! I think you’re pretty amazing, actually! You’re only the second person who’s ever stopped my wrench this completely!” Graham shouted, remembering a kind of tension he’d felt only once before.

When Jacuzzi Splot and his group—whom he now treated with affection as his sworn little brothers and sisters—had first come to New York, Graham’s group had intended to hand them over to the Russo Family and pick up the bounty.

However, due to some missed connections and mistaken assumptions, they’d ended up kidnapping Chané Laforet, and in the process, he’d ended up crossing blades with her as well. Well, crossing blade and tool, to be accurate.

At that point, in a snappy entrance worthy of Zorro, from *The Curse of Capistrano*, a redheaded man had appeared.

The self-proclaimed Felix Walken had caught the wrench Graham had flung at him with all his might, then lobbed it back even faster.

It was impossible to predict where the present situation would go next as Graham remembered the past. Shaking off the memory of that exasperating redhead, he pictured the faces of the sworn younger siblings he'd parted with just a few days earlier, Jacuzzi and Nice.

Come to think of it, I wonder how Jacuzzi and them are doing.

Graham, who had no idea that they were currently very near this bar, smiled wanly as he thought:

Can't afford to lose here, huh?

"Sad… Yeah, that's right! Let me tell you a sad story of mine!"

"Ha-ha! Sure, go for it!"

There was a metallic clank, and the wrenches sprang apart.

The combatants leaped away from each other, then immediately clashed again. He shouldn't have had any leeway to talk, but Graham kept going.

"Last time, it was a redheaded fella—and this time a red-eyed fella caught it, huh?! What is going on? What is this? Is red my unlucky color? If so, that would mean all the blood in my body is unlucky for me… And I'm livin' life to the fullest with misfortune itself in my veins. Not too shabby, huh? Huh?!"

"Maybe not, but that line is!"

"Shut your yap, Shaft!"

Whipping his head around, Graham yelled at his friend offering comebacks from a distance.

It could have been a fatal opening, but Christopher had also turned to look at Shaft.

"I thought it was pretty nifty, myself."

"Thanks! But I'm gonna break you!"

No sooner had he thanked Christopher than Graham jumped onto a table again and immediately leaped clear over his opponent and into a forward flip.

Without breaking the momentum of his rotation, he tried to strike Christopher's spine with his wrench.

But a moment sooner, Christopher dived forward.

Feeling a vicious gust of wind at his back, he ducked under a table, grateful that he'd managed to evade.

Then he kicked a chair into the air, trying to send it crashing into Graham's legs now that they were firmly planted on the floor—but failed.

Graham had heard the sound of the kick connecting with the chair, and a moment before it reached him, he jumped into the air and stepped off it to launch himself forward, attempting to smash the restaurant's table with his wrench.

I'll have to pay for the damage, huh…

With that laid-back concern running through his head, he began to mercilessly bring down the wrench—when he realized that the table was *heading his way*.

"?!"

The table Christopher had kicked up toward him delivered a body blow that knocked Graham back a little ways. Just as he regained his balance, he spotted a light rushing toward him—scarlet, crimson, red—and he whipped the wrench forward to defend himself.

However, Christopher was ready for that, and the blow he unleashed came not from the small blunt instrument in his hand, but from the sturdy legs that had just kicked the table.

With its momentum boosted by a kick to the floor, his knee drove straight into Graham's side.

“…—!”

Graham felt an impact and pain that seemed to make his blood itself boil. He curled up on reflex, but he summoned all his willpower to bend backward. Then, with a greasy sweat running down his cheeks—he sent his forehead and the bangs hiding it crashing into Christopher’s face.

“…!”

They each took a step back, taking a break to ease the pain and calm their ragged breathing.

Then, before either of them had managed to fully catch their breath, they both started to laugh.

“Ha…!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Then, finally, Graham fell silent. The two of them drew in deep breaths, preparing for the next instant, but—

—suddenly, a shock ran through both men’s legs. They lost their balance almost simultaneously, and their butts landed hard on the floor.

Christopher and Graham looked around in unison, wondering what had happened.

Their eyes found the figure of a woman in a fluttering green dress.

Light and smooth as a pendulum, Sickle stood back up from sweeping their legs out from under them.

“I was sitting tight and watching…but I don’t have the time to put up with your slapstick routine anymore,” she said in her dispassionate, masculine way.

The red-eyed young man shook his head, looking troubled. “You mustn’t meddle in this, Sickle. This is between him and me—”

“Don’t worry.”

Sickle’s face was expressionless, but as she shot Christopher down, her anger burned in her eyes.

“I’ll kick you both down.”

What had happened to their reunion after so many years?

Glancing at his companions and their enemy, who were now involved in a perfect three-way battle, the Poet gave a bone-weary sigh from his spot behind the pillar, then murmured a long, meaningless speech.

“Chaos—is a momentary trial given to us by God. At the same time, it is also an illusion… If the trial itself is an illusion, then should we consider the burgeoning of the spirit gained after its scars have been overcome a mere shadow, unable even to become the feed scattered in the dismal corf…?”

The Poet was fully aware that there was no meaning in that string of words, but his bombastic, fanciful phrases never stopped.

Even as he moved his lips, he was hoping that this chaos would settle down as soon as possible.

I’d at least like them to do something about it before the ribs are done.

However, he knew he was only a powerless poet, so—

—in the end, all he could do was pray.

After that, he simply let his feelings drift among the fortunes and misfortunes chance had led them to.

However…there was one doubt he couldn’t completely shake, and it made him apprehensive.

It was no more than a hunch, but it was a very important one.

His group, the young man in the coveralls, and even Christopher had come together here.

In all of vast Chicago, they'd run into one another here on this day, at this time.

This prompted a simple, clear question, and the Poet silently repeated it:

Was it really a coincidence?

Just that one phrase, over and over.

Granted, at this point, there was nothing else he could do, but…



In the combination kitchen and office

As this comedic violence was playing out in the dining area, back in the kitchen, the old couple were at their wit's end.

The kitchen felt a little roomier than the bar's external appearance suggested.

A thin wall divided the room in half, and there was a combined office and living space behind it.

The setup certainly wasn't sanitary, but unless you were particularly fastidious, it wasn't an affront to hygiene. In fact, the kitchen itself was polished to a shine, without a speck of mold to be seen. Several sets of pork ribs with various seasonings sat in a row in front of the oven, and inside, the first orders of meat were roasting.

"…You see, dear? I told you so. I said I had a bad feeling about it."

Just ten minutes after they opened, a wrench had flown through the bar. Then they'd begun to hear a clamoring and the sound of things breaking.

“W-well, it’s happened now, so there’s nothing to be done. I’ll go find a way to calm those folks down, so you stay here and keep cooking!”

“Darling! Have you lost your mind?”

An absurd situation like this, and her husband was telling her to keep cooking! The woman looked startled, but the proprietor tried to reassure his wife with a forced smile, and drew a very deep breath.

“Oh, it’ll be all right. If it comes down to it, the telephone’s right there, so we can just call the police. It’s not as if a robber is shooting up the place with a shotgun. It’s only some customers getting into a little spat.”

“I hope it doesn’t become anything worse than ‘a little spat’…” the wife murmured, sounding tired.

Her husband gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze, then spoke to her quietly.

“I’m the one who opened the bar, so this is my problem to solve. For now, sit tight back here so you don’t get pulled into it.” With that, he left the kitchen.

She and her husband had been together for many years, but her unease seemed to have won out over his reassurances. She reached out, intending to call the police.

I’m sorry, dear. I really do have an awfully bad feeling about this.

She didn’t know whether it was the people responsible for this ruckus or someone who was watching them from a distance, but somewhere in the group of current customers, something was giving her a bad feeling similar to the one before. She wasn’t psychic or anything like it. This was nothing more than instinct, the experience of the long years she’d lived, but…

…she decided to trust that hunch.

One of those customers…I think…isn't normal…

Was it Christopher and the other homunculi, or was it Graham, who marched to the beat of his own drum? Both, perhaps? Either way, in order to ward off the bad premonition she was getting from the group, she reached for the receiver.

The next moment—

—that bad feeling welled up inside her again.

This time, it wasn't even based in experience. It really was no more than instinct.

Something—something about the receiver felt wrong. Like she shouldn't pick it up.

The telephone itself seemed like bad news.

It was a very strong sense of foreboding, just like the one she'd been feeling for a while now.

However, despite her misgivings, the wife picked up the receiver—

—and then she knew for certain that her premonition had been correct.

She'd lifted the receiver, but she didn't even hear the tone that would connect her to the operator. Only silence greeted her ears.

The line was dead.

Interlude III: The Alchemist, Impassive

Under Alcatraz Penitentiary Special cell

“Nooo… NOOOOooooooooOOOOOOOOOOoooOOOooOOooo!”

It was a shriek one would never expect to hear in a men’s prison.

Not only was the voice female, but the pitch of the scream made it clear that it belonged to a young child.

However, the cry was so muffled by the thick walls and ceiling it never reached the upper levels of Alcatraz.

In exchange— The exact same screams rang out all across America, from all types of different women.

“Nooo… No, nooOOOooo! Father…his eye! …Fatherrrrrrr, AAAAaaaaah…”

A man knelt on one knee in front of the wailing girl.

A deep red cavern was visible through the gap under his left eyelid, showing that the eye that should have occupied it was gone. The man was smiling faintly, but the girl didn’t even see it. To her, the simple fact that this man was wounded seemed to be shattering the world around her, and she shrieked and raved with anxiety.

“Whyyyyy?! Aaaaaaah! Wh…————?”

But in the next moment—the screams reverberating around the room abruptly vanished.

The man she’d called Father had gently hugged the shaking girl.

“It’s all right, Leeza.”

“Ah…aah…ngh…”

“Calm down, please. My field of vision’s only shrunk a little, that’s all.”

The girl kept shivering for a while longer, and until it subsided completely, the man—Huey Laforet—just smiled wordlessly.

But the smile wasn't so much directed at his daughter…

…as a suggestion that he was enjoying the situation.

When the girl was finally calmer, Huey sat her down on the bed. He looked around the room for a little while, then mused as if the matter had nothing to do with him.

"It isn't like simply closing one eye, is it…? Hmm. What an intriguing experience."

"Why…? Father, your left eye… Where did it go?" Leeza, Huey's daughter, murmured quietly. She was being careful not to look at his face.

Huey gave a troubled smile and thought about how he should answer that question.

Should he just come out and tell her that someone who was in the room at the time gouged it out?

Or should he make up an excuse of some sort and evade the question?

If she found out that a member of that group—most likely Firo—had wounded him…

…it was highly probable she would go to recover the stolen eye without a thought for the danger of her own position.

In addition, after she'd retaken it, she wouldn't forgive the thief. She might try to slaughter everyone who'd been there at the time.

Mind you, that does sound interesting in its own right.

If Firo had been her only opponent, he was a fellow immortal, and there was almost no chance that he'd kill Leeza in retaliation.

However… If the men who'd referred to themselves as "the former Felix Walkens" and that fellow Ladd came into it, the story would change completely.

Ladd Russo would probably be able to kill even a girl like Leeza without compunction. He'd known from the information he'd acquired in advance, but actually seeing him had convinced him of the truth of what he'd learned.

The man might be insane, but rationally so.

He was being true to his convictions, perfectly conscious of what he was doing.

His brutal personality might give others the wrong idea, but Ladd was at his core very coolheaded and calculating. However, it was likely that his impulses overrode those calculations. He couldn't yet tell whether those impulses were anger, purely sadistic desires, or something else entirely, but at any rate, the man probably wouldn't hesitate to kill Leeza.

That would be a bit troublesome.

There are still several things about the child that I'd like to research…

And at the very least, I'll need her to make herself useful during my escape.

As he mulled over these very unfatherly ideas, Huey stroked his daughter's head gently.

"It's all right. This is nothing."

"It's not okay… It's not, it's not! Father, you—you can't get hurt! It's not possible… It can't happen! Father, Father… Who was it? Who did this?! I'll kill them! I'll kill them—it's wrong—you just can't get hurt, Father!"

From the way she spoke, it was hard to tell whether she was worried or not, but Huey knew that this was what Leeza was like.

Leeza Laforet.

She was Huey's biological daughter, and yet she also had another name.

One she shared with several hundred people.

Hilton.

Like Sham, she was an entity that controlled multiple bodies using one shared mind.

The original research had been performed by Szilard Quates, but a certain alchemist had stolen Szilard's research, completed it, and created a practical technique from it—at which point, Huey had acquired it. Most of his organization seemed to be under the impression that Huey had stolen it, but another alchemist had been the original thief.

If you made a human drink a certain liquid, the will of a certain something inhabiting that liquid would initiate a struggle with the human's mind, each trying to take over the other. Then, if the liquid won that fight, it would claim all of the human's knowledge and experience as its own, able to use them as easily as its new hands and feet. Conversely, if the human won control, they would gain only the other's memories, and would then be free to live their life as they chose.

It wasn't like poison or a truth serum. It was a pure battle of wills.

What did this involve, exactly? Huey hadn't experienced it directly, but as far as he was concerned, having his entire mind stolen from him would be the same as being eaten.

Come to think of it… Wonder if anyone ever ended up eating him*?*

The man had paid several visits to Rhythm, Huey's research team, providing them with techniques to use in creating Sham and Hilton, along with various information and rumors. However, a little while back, he'd completely dropped out of touch.

When Szilard Quates had been eaten by Firo, had his memories been among those Firo had inherited well? Or had he fallen prey to someone else's hand—? Or was he hiding from Huey?

Well, I suppose he doesn't matter right now.

Smirking at himself for getting sidetracked, Huey spoke to the girl in front of him.

"Right now, the question of who took it is trivial. We can take our time retrieving it. Right now, the New York project and leaving this island are more important."

"No… But they…! I mean…but…"

The man who was most affected was telling her not to worry about it, but Leeza shook her head, unconvinced.

Of course, this was probably a normal reaction for someone with an injured family member.

But Huey knew—Leeza's reaction was something closer to religious devotion than familial love.

He also knew he was the one who'd raised her to be that way.

Just after his daughter was born, he'd fed her a liquid that hadn't yet acquired any knowledge or experience, and had then carefully, meticulously raised her.

As far as she was concerned, Huey was at the center of everything, and although she was all over the world as the information collector Hilton and the on-site commander Leeza, it was safe to say that her world revolved around Huey Laforet, her father and the God of her universe.

She had more knowledge and experience and a greater field of vision than an ordinary human, but even so, to her, Huey's values were absolute.

Huey guessed what Leeza was probably thinking now.

God had been wounded.

Her world had been insulted.

And the one responsible was someone who wasn't her father—an insect who shouldn't have been important enough for a second glance!

I don't think of them as insects, particularly, but Leeza has always had that tendency. It's a bit of a problem.

Neatly ignoring his own proclivity to think of the whole world as material for his experiments, Huey calmly continued to deduce his daughter's thoughts.

Leeza was Hilton's first individual body, the progenitor of all the rest, and strangely, Hilton seemed to feel it was special.

Sham had rapidly used up and discarded his first body. Unlike him, she treated the body linked to his by blood as a specially selected entity, even though all of Hilton's countless hands and feet shared the same mind.

Was it more similar to an ordinary person deciding their right pinkie finger was the most well-shaped, or was it closer to the way he himself considered his heart or his brain to be an important organ?

He couldn't read her so thoroughly, but this was the only body that spoke in Leeza's natural, childish cadences, and she seemed to use her other bodies quite carelessly.

"Father…I…I can't let them get away with it… Who was it? That Ladd guy?! Or was it the one named Firo?! I'll go after them right now! I'll cut that thief to pieces!"

It was obviously the scream of a petulant child, but what she was saying wasn't childlike at all.

Putting a hand to Leeza's cheek, Huey closed his left eyelid, hiding the wound.

"Leeza, there's no need for you to put yourself in more danger. I don't know how long I was unconscious, but if my eye was what they were after, then that correctional officer is bound to have taken it off the island already."

"Correctional officer… One of the guards did it?!"

"It's a long story."

From Leeza's vehement reply, she seemed ready to declare a massacre of all the guards on the island. As he stroked her head, out of the corner of his eye, Huey shot a glance at the guard—Sham—who lay near the entrance. Then, very quietly, he began to tell her about what had happened here.

"I'll walk you through what happened, so do calm down, Leeza."

The look in his eye was different from what it had been a moment earlier. He'd noticed the faint suggestion of a desire welling up in his heart.

If this body were to be lost…how would that affect Hilton as a whole?

Huey entertained the idea for just a moment. Then, very faintly, he chuckled.

Once again, he was reminded that even his own daughter was nothing more than a research subject to him.

If there is an afterlife…

…I suppose I would fall into one of Dante's nine circles of hell.

Huey stroked his daughter's hair one more time, then thought about the girl's eyes, so similar to his own, and about his current self.

Which of them was more out of step with the rest of the world? What did await such beings like the two of them after death—existence or oblivion? Would they even be able to die in the same way humans did?

I am looking forward to finding out, but…

"Leeza, I have no intention of spending the long years that lie ahead of me without my left eye. It's only that I may need you to serve as its replacement in order to retake it. It will mean robbing you of your freedom, but…"

"That's completely fine! Even if you said I could do whatever I want, I'd wanna be your eye for you, Father!"

His daughter nodded firmly. Even then, as he watched her, Huey only smiled faintly.

For now, this world still holds a mountain of things I must learn.

Then, slowly, Huey began to speak.

Doing his best not to add fuel to Leeza's anger…

…yet making sure to leave ill will toward Firo in her heart.

As he slowly, slowly chose his words…

…the solitary man resumed his lonely, endless experiment.



Several dozen minutes later…

The girl's tear-swollen eyelids were closed, and she was breathing softly, fast asleep.

Laying a blanket over his daughter, Huey quietly sat down in the chair in the center of the room.

“Well, well. Leeza’s asleep, Master Huey?”

“Yes, I finally managed to put her to bed.”

“…What happened to your left eye?”

“It isn’t important. Don’t worry about it.”

The room’s electric bulb had already been extinguished. Light came in from the corridor, accompanied by a voice, and Huey responded without seeming particularly surprised.

“So you finally woke up, did you? I was wondering what I’d do if you’d died.”

“If I had, another me would simply have come to collect the body.”

“It doesn’t bother you when your bodies die, Sham?”

“No. It’s probably similar to the feeling of losing a hand or a foot.”

The figure that slowly got to its feet in the doorway belonged to the guard that Ladd had knocked out for the second time a few moments ago.

Okay.

As he watched Huey, Sham quietly thought about the future.

Huey couldn’t have noticed the betrayal yet.

From this point on, I’ll need to take each step with utmost caution.

…Particularly in front of Master Huey.

Even though he’d sold him out, Sham still called Huey “Master” in his mind.

Shutting his true intentions away deep inside himself, he spoke indifferently.

“Reporting in: The members of Lamia fought the Russo Family in Chicago. During the battle, Renee Parmedes Branvillier arrived, and Nebula personnel shot Frank and took him away. It is unclear whether he is alive or dead, but I’ll go find out immediately, *using the me inside Nebula*.”

Phrasing himself oddly, Sham quietly waited for Huey to speak.

“…”

Huey was silent for a little while. At long last, he replied, “Are you all right?”

“Sir?”

“The injuries they inflicted on you, I mean. You appear to have been struck from behind… In addition, your position shifted slightly from what it was before I lost consciousness. Did you wake once before?”

“…”

The question came out of nowhere. Perhaps unprepared for such a question, Sham shook his head as steadily as he could as he replied.

“No… I imagine someone gave me a good kick on their way out of the room.”

“I see. I only thought you might have awakened and heard their conversation.”

“Oh…” Sham responded automatically, but inside, he was far from calm. After all, he was dealing with Huey Laforet. It was possible that he’d seen through the whole of his betrayal and was just teasing him now.

However, if he acted flustered, the other man would suspect him, even if he didn’t already.

Trying to behave as naturally as possible, he continued his report in his usual tone.

“And now… Rail is asking me to help him save Frank.”

“Oho. Rail, asking for help. That’s unusual.”

Huey’s thoughts were more occupied by Rail’s actions than by the battle with the Russos or with Frank’s capture.

Even if he was more than half betraying him, this man was Sham’s master and an anomaly himself, and this newly reinforced awareness of the fact made him shiver. He felt the disquiet prickling on the back of his neck, but he still carried on the conversation.

“What should I do?”

“Go ahead and cooperate with him, if you would.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

He’s not even going to ask what I’m helping him with?

As if he’d read Sham’s shocked mind, Huey gave a light, self-deprecating smile.

“I’m not omnipotent myself, you know. Granted, I would like to be someone like Ronny Schiatto and avoid the inconvenience of times like this, but in any case… The experiment in Chicago will continue until further notice, but I don’t think I’ll be able to give specific instructions for a little while.”

“I see…”

“I am worried about Frank as well. It’s just too much work to let it show in my expression.”

“How much of that was a joke, sir?”

“The part about being worried about Frank was serious, while the second half was a joke. I am genuinely concerned about Frank, but… You are aware that I’m a villain incapable of sorrow for another’s sake, I suppose? If Salomé heard that a test subject had been shot, he might foam at the mouth and keel over, but…”

After alluding to the chief of the research team working directly under him, Huey fell silent for a short while.

Then, pondering something from the brief report he'd received a moment ago, before he asked for details, he made a single short remark.

"Renee Parmedes Branvillier…"

"Yes. There's no doubt that she was involved. I've confirmed it myself."

"I had anticipated as much, but now it's finally happening…"

"Yes. Both the senator and the Bureau of Investigation were focused on New York, but in her case, there were a number of coincidences, in addition to her connection to the Russo Family."

Sham continued dispassionately reporting the details, and as he listened, Huey narrowed his eyes quietly.

After they'd discussed the future for a little while, Huey slowly got up from his chair and issued an order to the Sham in front of him.

"In that case, be wary of Firo Prochainezo and the other prisoners who were in this room earlier. The guard who was here… I can't determine his name simply from looking at him, but Ladd Russo punched him in the face, so you should be able to identify him by the wound. Check into him as well."

"Understood, sir." He bowed deeply, then turned to go.

Behind him, Huey spoke quietly. "At some point tomorrow, I'll be *leaving*. Once that happens, I will issue orders directly, on-site."

"…Yes, sir."

Sham closed the door soundlessly so as not to wake Leeza. As he walked down the dark corridor, he exhaled deeply.

I hope he hasn't caught on to me, but…

He knew how sharp Huey was, and the words *relaxation* and *carelessness* might as well not exist for him at this point.

However, drawing in another deep breath, he set his guard's cap back on his head with a sort of determination.

Even if he has…

…I'll stick to my guns to the very end.



While Sham was mustering his resolve amid uncertain circumstances, Huey was wearing a smile whose motivations were equally unclear.

"Renee Parmedes Branvillier…"

Murmuring the name that had come up in the report a few moments ago, Huey gazed up at the ceiling in fond remembrance.

It's still a tongue twister.

I can see why Elmer called her by a different nickname every day.

The smile he wore just then wasn't calculating, nor was it a cold smile for the benefit of those around him. It held a natural warmth, like any other person's.

In memory, he traveled back to a time before he was immortal…

…recalling the time in his long, long life when he'd enjoyed himself the most.

Just calling her Renee would've been the easiest option if we could've gotten away with it, but…

He remembered how she'd looked when he was still young. Considering *the difference in their ages at the time*, he'd inevitably hesitated to initiate a first-name basis.

I know we're enemies right now…but if we do ever see each other again, I guess I should call her the same way I always did?

Thinking this, Huey quietly spoke the name.

"…Maestra Parmedes."

Then he fell into a reverie.

Into his fond memories of better days.

Before he'd been locked in this prison.

Before Leeza and Chané had been born.

Before he'd become immortal.

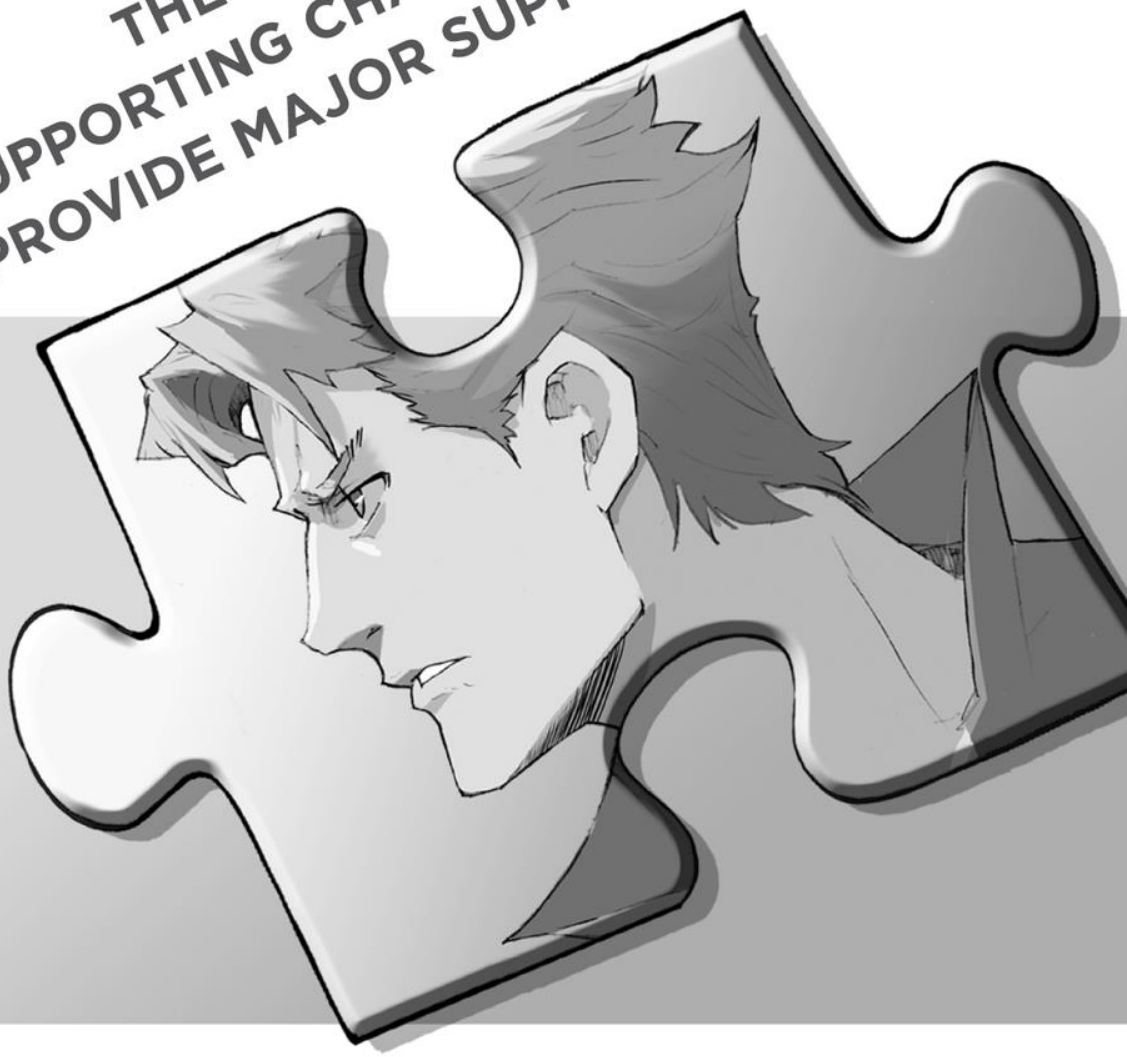
Even before he'd met Maiza and the rest…

The good old days when he and Elmer had taken those curious classes that weren't quite alchemy and weren't quite magic.

In his dream, their alchemy teacher was knocking over experimental equipment and nearly bursting into tears over it—as she still did to this very day, *looking exactly the same*.

A young woman with dowdy glasses and a model's figure.

CHAPTER 4
THE MAJOR SUPPORTING CHARACTERS PROVIDE MAJOR SUPPORT



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Chicago Nebula headquarters building

“Meep!”

The strange-sounding cry suddenly echoed in a research facility in the basement of Nebula.

“What’s the matter, Director? That was a funny noise.”

A man who’d been straightening up some documents sent a questioning look at the lady responsible for it.

The woman he’d called director—Renee Parmedes Branvillier—flushed bright red and met the stares of those around her with an ingratiating smile.

“Uh, um. I held back a sneeze, and it came out weird… Someone must have been talking about me.”

Below her demure, bespectacled face, her incredibly voluptuous curves were hidden by a plain lab coat.

The subordinate who’d been organizing papers shook his head with obvious exhaustion at his boss—who might have been either appealing or drab; it was hard to say.

“Nobody’s talking about you. Just do your job, Director, and quit being full of yourself.”

“That’s so mean!!”

The mood in the research room was as peaceful as always, but…

…the room next to it was partitioned off by thick glass. Behind it was an odd sight for a lab room meant for processing special pharmaceuticals.

In the center of the room lay a body as big as a bear's, except the limbs sticking out of the sleeves and pant legs were soft and flesh-colored, showing that this was a proper human.

Maybe he had been given an anesthetic, or maybe he wasn't even breathing anymore. The giant boy, lying across several beds pushed together and surrounded by researchers, was as still as a stone.

Looking at the guinea pig beyond the thick glass, Renee murmured as if she'd remembered something.

"Come to think of it, it sounds as though the bombings yesterday caused a lot of trouble."

"We're lucky there were no deaths, but… It's likely that the culprit was that boy we were discussing."

"Then he's desperate to save his friend here! That's actually rather touching."

"…What I'm saying is that unrelated facilities took massive damage because you messed with him and then backed out. Any thoughts on that, Director?" he asked, temples twitching.

At that, as if to deflect attention from the cold sweat that had broken out on her cheeks, Renee stared off into the distance and muttered:

"Couldn't we just say it was the work of a passing mad bomber, nothing to do with me?"

"No, we can't! Obviously! Even if the police fell for that, do you know what the chairman said to me this morning in person?! 'Say, I don't mind you doin' what you wanna do, but don't go causin' grief for other departments. Go apologize to the kid with the bombs already.' Everybody knows everything about this!"

"Yeep? Wh-why does the chairman know about Rail?" Her upset behavior betrayed a marked lack of real anxiety as she muttered, "What should we do? What should we do?"

As he looked at the woman, whose actions and overall impression were completely incompatible, one of the nearby researchers spoke wearily.

“Director, director. About what you just said.”

“What I just said? Um… Remind me what that was again?”

“You know, the bit about pinning it on a passing mad bomber. That could actually work.”

“Huh? What? Is there one?” Renee muttered, proposing an impossible scenario, and her subordinate gave an unbelievable reply.

“Yes. Yes, there is.”

“Whaaat?!”

Even though she was the one who’d suggested it, Renee looked startled when the man confirmed it.

The researcher went on, speaking impassively to his hopeless supervisor.

“A friend of mine in the general affairs section was telling me about it during my break a few minutes back. A little while ago, the police—”



Just about the time the rumor-loving researcher was telling his boss about a girl named Nice…

A man who was a specialist in handling information was seated on a cushy sofa between two girls.

One of the them was like a daughter to him…

…while the other was the fiancée of a bloodthirsty killer who was currently doing time.

Nebula headquarters The chairman’s office

“Well, you just kick back and relax.”

“You have my thanks, Chairman Cal.”

In response to the man who was sitting in the chair opposite him, Gustav St. Germain, the vice president of the information brokerage, bowed his head deeply.

“No need to be so starchy about it. Unlike last time, you’re not here on business today.”

In answer to the vice president’s reverent thanks, the elderly man—Cal Muybridge, the chairman of the Nebula group—cackled and waved his hand. Unlike the sharp-eyed Gustav, his expression made him seem truly mild, despite being one of the “winners” with some of the greatest corporate power in America.

The young girl was daunted by his presence; she clutched her camera and sat on the very edge of the sofa, shaking like a leaf. Meanwhile, the woman with long hair sitting on the opposite end of the sofa was gazing around tranquilly, as if she didn’t really understand the situation yet.

“Hey, Lil’ Miss Camera. What was your name? Carol? We already met earlier, so there’s no need to be so jittery. Last time, you looked like you was about to upchuck; you doin’ okay?”

“Eep?! Th-thank you very much! I-I’m sorry!”

Carol, the girl with the camera, shook even harder when her name was called by the concerned chairman.

Watching her out of the corner of her eye, Lua Klein—the woman with long hair—smiled at her softly.

Vice President Gustav had taken Carol and Lua and beat a hasty retreat from the gunshots at Placido’s mansion.

After that, they'd decided to find a safe place for Lua to lie low. However, Carol had uneasily suggested that there were bound to be guards at their hotel and the station. The vice president had thought, *Hmm… Without a car, we are unable to leave Chicago. In that case…*

And thus, Carol, Lua, and Gustav were currently sitting on a sofa in the office of Nebula's chairman.

Yesterday, Carol had been put up in a Nebula guest bedroom before she really knew what was happening. Now, though, as she looked at the chairman of Nebula, she finally understood the plight she was in, and she was filled with regret. She wished they had gotten out of Chicago, even if they had to walk.

"Still, well, y'know. The sister with long hair over there; I hear Placido had you locked up? What a rough time that musta been. They didn't try anything funny, did they?"

"Chairman."

"Whoops, sorry, sorry. Not a question to ask a lady, huh. Well, I doubt that old coot has the guts. You're his nephew…whozit, Ladd, right? You're Ladd's girl?"

Lua's heart jumped at the abrupt mention of her lover's name, and her gaze went to the old man in front of her.

At the sight of her faintly surprised expression, the chairman guffawed and went on.

"Here's the thing: At my company, that guy's a lil' bit of a celebrity. Back when he was still just a greenhorn, he busted into this company by himself and made it all the way up here to the chairman's office. Nearly died."

"Oho. That was a narrow escape, wasn't it?" Gustav murmured, though his expression didn't change. The chairman smacked his own gray head, smiling back with chagrin.

“No kiddin’. But then he says, ‘Hey, mister… You’re okay with dyin’ anytime, ain’tcha? Dullsville… I’m goin’ home.’ I asked around, and it turns out he’d had a bet with his friends about whether he could pick a fight with me, or actually, with Nebula. If he was gonna do that, I wish he’d gone to Rude or Beriam or some other rich fella’s place instead. Haw-haw!”

“I-is that a story to laugh about? You’re—you’re joking, aren’t you?”

Even though she was frightened, Carol managed to put in a comeback. But beside her, Lua said, “That does sound like him…”

Seeing her blush, the girl’s hands went to her head instead of her camera.

“Well, it don’t matter. Anyway, I see what’s goin’ on real good now! You three can hole up in the employee dorm right here in this buildin’ for a while. I bet it won’t take too long for all this to settle down.”

“Thank you very much.”

Lua thanked him quietly, and the chairman grinned.

“Sweetheart, if you’re gonna thank somebody, thank that evil-lookin’ fella with the monocle over there. If he’s offerin’ to trade me for all sorts of intel money just can’t buy, then I sure can’t say no.”

“You said we’d leave business out of this, yet you keep a close eye on your cost-benefit ratio,” Gustav pointed out with some irony.

The chairman got to his feet, cackling. “Well, ask the fella from security over there about the rest of it. He used to be a Runorata Family man, and I bet he knows all sorts of ways to protect yourselves from the mafia.”

When the chairman glanced over, a black-haired man who was standing in the shadow of a pillar bowed. In his right hand, he held a

jar filled with sugar cubes, and when he'd finished his bow, he extracted one and tossed it into his mouth.

As the man expressionlessly crunched away on the sugar cube, Carol felt an eerie sense of wrongness about him, but…

…after the chairman had gone, she realized the vice president was frowning, and her unease grew.

"Wh-what's the matter, Vice President?"

"Hmm… Carol. There is something I would like to confirm with you."

"Wh-what is it?"

The girl was as nervous as could be. The vice president narrowed his already sharp eyes and murmured:

"Is my face…really so villainous?"



A corridor at Nebula headquarters

"Hello. My name is Rubik; I've been put in charge of seeing to your needs. I'll show you to the rooms where you stayed last night. If there's anything you want, don't hesitate to ask."

Despite his polite words, the man kept munching on sugar cubes as Carol and the others followed him to the company's in-house guest bedrooms.

Carol's skin prickled and trembled at the dark mood hanging around the man, but Gustav seemed unruffled as he asked him a question.

"Mr. Rubik… If memory serves, you used to be a frequent customer of our company, correct?"

He was so calm.

Gustav said the words far too calmly.

The man crunched the sugar cube he had in his mouth between his teeth. Then, still walking, he responded to the man behind him with another question.

"…I don't recall meeting you directly…"

"As vice president, I inevitably learn the names of our best clients."

"…You're right. Up until about the year before last, I was doing something like that," Rubik answered indifferently, and Gustav continued his questions.

"You placed yourself in a variety of organizations, then sold information you acquired there to us and to hostile syndicates. However, you ceased contacting us quite abruptly. Did something happen?"

"Nothing in particular. I just didn't feel confident that I could keep up that line of espionage work anymore… I retired. Especially after the competition showed up…"

"'The competition'?" Carol asked in spite of herself.

The man exhaled quietly. Then, still without turning around, he mumbled the name.

"If you're with the *Daily Days*, miss, I expect you know them already."

"That bunch of monsters—there's no telling how many there are. Call themselves Sham?"



In a train on the transcontinental railroad

Inside an enormous bullet that was traveling at more than sixty miles per hour, Isaac was chatting like an old friend with a man he'd just met.

On the train, the incredibly shady character had introduced himself as a spy. After telling Isaac he'd been watching him and Miria for quite a while, the man continued the conversation, reminiscing.

"The first time I saw you… I believe it was in New York. When you scattered all that money."

"Oh, yeah! Wow, that takes me back! You were there, Sham?"

"While I'm ashamed to admit it, I picked up a few bills myself."

"Hey, that's fine! All those people picking it up meant Miria and I managed to get away from the cops!"

Isaac smiled, thinking fondly back to that time. Sham continued relating his memories.

"About a year later… You had a terrible time on the Flying Pussyfoot, didn't you?"

"Huh?! You were on that train, too?! Aah, yeah, it was rough. I didn't want to scare Miria, so I did my best to be brave, but I just couldn't!"

"…No one could have wandered around on that train without some courage, you know."

"Really? Then I bet Miria shared hers with me! …Say, where were you, Sham? In the dining car?" It was a natural thing to ask.

Sham shook his head. "No, I was in a first-class compartment."

"I see! So you've got money, then."

"Ha-ha, no. I just have a generous boss."

Although, after that, that stowaway gal dropped me off the train.

Sham didn't finish that sentence aloud. Instead, he said, "You're quite friendly with Jacuzzi's group as well, aren't you?"

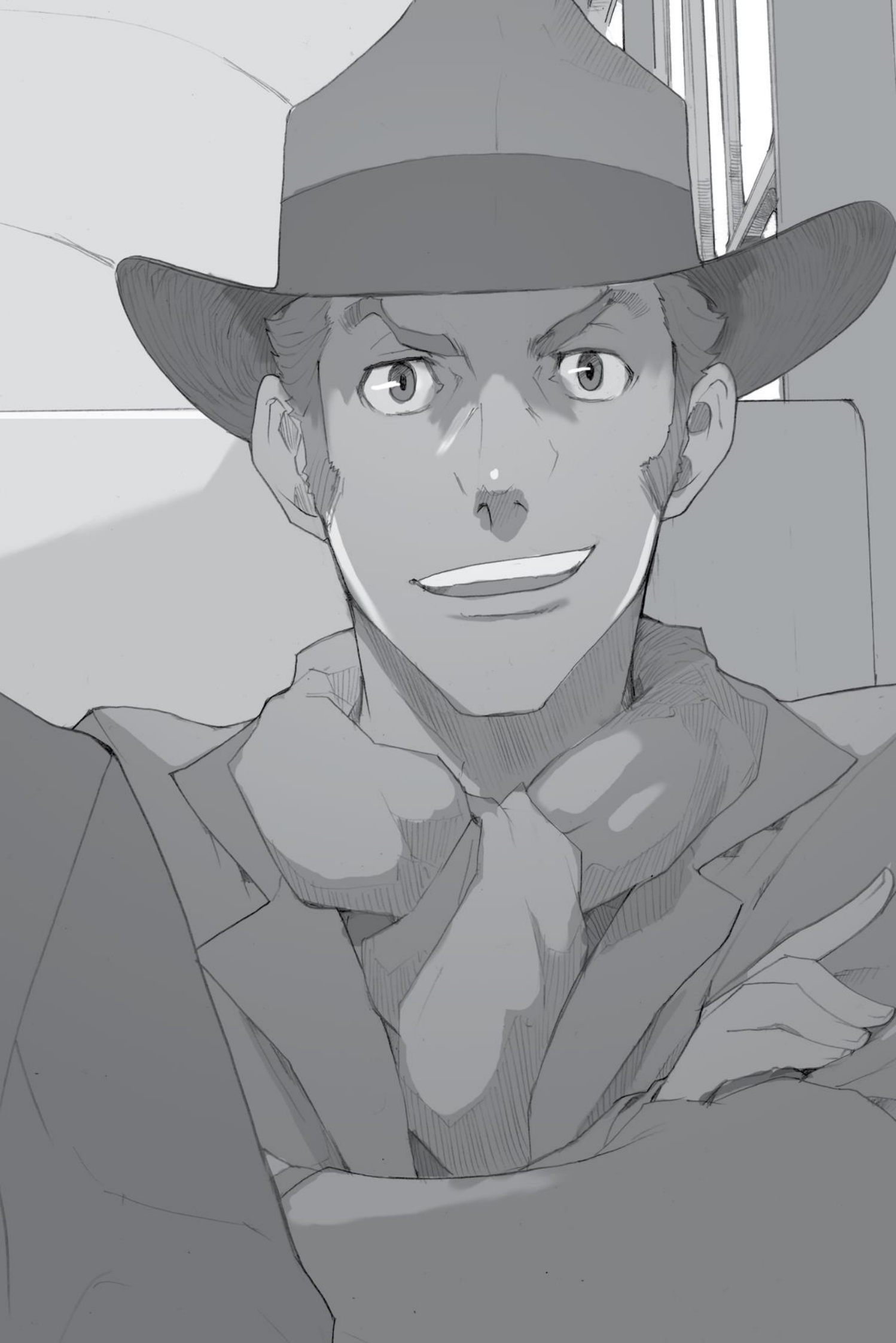
“Yes! To use *The Records of the Three Kingdoms* as a metaphor…uh… Aha! In terms of *The Records of the Three Kingdoms*, Jacuzzi is Alexander the Great!”

“That is quite an assessment.”

“Yeah! After all, he’s Great!”

Even though Isaac wasn’t necessarily being praised, he threw out his chest proudly.

The gesture was reminiscent of a little kid, childish in a way that was impossible to imagine from his apparent age.



However, Sham only narrowed his eyes in a smile, and he did nothing that seemed to mock Isaac.

“Isaac… You and Miria have encountered a wide variety of trouble, haven’t you.”

“Hmm? You think so?”

“Yes, I do. There’s the matter of the Flying Pussyfoot, for example, and the explosion at Mist Wall…”

“I dunno about that. I think those kinds of things happen to most people, don’t they?”

Isaac sounded genuinely mystified, and Sham was left unable to respond.

He really couldn’t sense anything resembling self-awareness from the young man in front of him.

He was oblivious to just how many incidents they’d set in motion, how many people they’d saved at one time or another, and how many destinies they’d sent off the rails.

It hadn’t been intentional. It was the product of pure coincidence.

Even on the Flying Pussyfoot, the absence of these two could have—to phrase it with some mild hyperbole—changed the destiny of America.

Regardless, they hadn’t done any of it on purpose, and they thought it was just a fluke. More accurately, they seemed completely unaware of the fates they’d changed.

That’s right. That’s exactly why.

As Sham whispered silently to himself, Isaac grinned and turned his eyes to the scenery outside.

The engine raced at a speed greater than sixty miles per hour, tearing across the country faster than an electric-powered train.

Getting excited over the thought of his reunion with Miria, Isaac spoke to Sham cheerfully.

“We should get there around noon tomorrow, huh! Trains are so fast. Nothing like walking!”

“…Have you ever walked across the continent?”

“No, come to think of it. I should probably try that next time, but if I wanted to compare myself to that locomotive, I guess I’d have to pull just as many train cars behind me… What’ll I do? I’m not sure I can manage that.”

“Nobody could.”

The man smiled in mild amazement. Then, his face suddenly grew serious, and he asked Isaac an odd question.

“Isaac. Do you…believe in God? Or in fate?”

“Sure I do.”

It was a startlingly frank answer. He hadn’t heard that Isaac was a devout Christian.

Before the man could inquire in more detail, Isaac began to smoothly explain.

“Old Yaguruma told me something once. According to him, the world is teeming with countless gods! They’re in all sorts of places, like pebbles and trees and mountains! Even centipedes! They’re the gods of money!”

“I see…”

Does he mean the Asian worship of the innumerable? My previous knowledge holds nothing about centipedes being gods.

“That means you can pray as much as you want to any god you want, but they can also dish out as much punishment as they want, so you’ve got to be careful! I spent a whole night talking with Miria

about which offering you should make to a rock, and our working hypothesis is cold medicine…”

“Um, well, that aside…” Sensing that the conversation was headed off on a tangent, Sham hastily returned it to his own topic. “Let’s say…say you’re in an absolutely hopeless situation, people encountered an incredible coincidence, and everything worked out after all. If fate or some other fortuitous coincidence occurred, what would you think?”

“Hmm? I’m not sure I follow, but it did work out, right?”

“Yes.”

“In that case, no worries. A happy ending!”

There was no thought behind the answer. It really was just like Isaac.

On hearing it, Sham grinned for a little while, but then…

“In that case… Think of it this way. Suppose—and this is all hypothetical, mind you—there was a person who had an ability that was modestly godlike: the power to intentionally bring about such coincidences.”

“Um, uh-huh?”

“The power may not be as helpful as, say, an ability to produce food infinitely, but… It’s a power that allows him to learn a variety of things, to summon various people to various places… And for example, to bring together two people who want to meet. And to keep people apart who shouldn’t meet.”

“That’s really something. He’s the god of matchmaking and love—Roulette!”

He was probably thinking of Cupid, but Sham decided there was no need to correct him, and just nodded lightly.

“However, the only people this individual helps are his acquaintances. If he only used that power based on his personal emotions… How far do you think he could go before it’s unforgivable?”

“Huh…? I’m not sure I understand… Is anyone ever truly unforgivable?”

Sham slowly pondered Isaac’s response, then continued the conversation.

“Here’s a slightly different example. Say you’re walking through the forest, and you see a butterfly caught in a spider’s web. If you take pity on the butterfly and save it, that’s just for the sake of self-satisfaction, isn’t it? In a similar way…”

“Why?”

“Hmm?”

“You saved the butterfly. Nothing wrong with that.”

Oh, please. Do I have to explain this starting all the way back there?

Smiling in mild exasperation at the childish reply, Sham quietly continued his example.

“Well, but there is, isn’t there? From the butterfly’s perspective, you’ve done it a great favor, but from the spider’s perspective, it’s lost its meal. Thanks to a human’s arbitrary feeling that butterflies are cute, that spider may die of starvation.”

“Sure. The butterfly lucked out, and Mr. Spider didn’t, so he doesn’t get to eat! I know the feeling. Miria and I’ve had some days where we didn’t get to eat, either. Mr. Spider’s got it rough.”

“‘Mr. Spider’? …Well, you see? That’s why it’s just humans trying to satisfy themselves in the end.”

“Still, that’s fine. You saved it.”

"…"

"Even if nobody saves it, a bird might come along and gulp down the spider. Or maybe the bird would eat the butterfly. Then the butterfly would still be unlucky, and Mr. Spider would still have an empty belly. Or a tree branch might come falling down and break the web, you know? So, uh… Oh, right. It's less about what people do than whether the luck was good or bad, isn't it?"

Why is he calling the spider "mister" when he isn't mister-ing anything else?

As his thoughts wandered off topic, Sham was nearly losing track of Isaac's reply. Maybe it was profound; maybe it was shallow. If Miria had been there, would he have come to a different conclusion, or would it have sounded different?

"That's being a little too pragmatic."

"I-is it? Sorry. I'm really not that smart, you see."

"Oh, no, that isn't what I…"

Sham hastily denied it, but Isaac said, "It's fine, it's fine" and went on, smiling. "Still, thinking about Mr. Spider's belly, and the forces of nature, and everything… Humans really are like gods, aren't they? Maybe I really am a little dim. I mean, if Miria was about to get eaten by a giant Mr. Spider, I think I'd probably rescue her without worrying about the spider's stomach."

"…"

That's a real leap, but he's technically right… No, I still think that's not quite it.

"Hmm. I don't understand how Mr. Spider feels or how the butterfly feels, but I doubt they understand our feelings, either. I wonder if they think of us the way we think about lightning and things. What do you think?"

“That’s a good question.”

The remark made Sham think for a little while.

Huey had raised him as a human, but on the other hand, he understood that he wasn’t human. He believed he thought exactly the same way as one, but there was no way to be sure.

The only thing he was certain of was this: He was not a human, but a single enormous mind shared by many bodies.

Even as he conversed with Isaac, his myriad other hands and feet were moving freely. As they did, they were thinking different things, and that information was being amassed in one gigantic set of memories.

Could an extraordinary being such as himself say that he understood human feelings?

His doubts were endless, but right now, he didn’t have the time to give them much thought.

True, he might be something that was like a human to spiders…and like lightning to humans.

In that case, he thought, the questions only deepened.

If lightning or an earthquake had some sort of emotion toward humanity, whether it was malice or goodwill…to what extent should they be allowed to carry out their own will?

The rock *that he’d set in motion* was already beginning to roll.

He’d resolved to live true to himself.

Yet, he still felt some hesitation.

He wasn’t sure whether it was really all right to use a being like himself to ensnare or save people.

Isaac had, by coincidence, set the destinies of various people in motion. Sham had believed that talking with him might make for a change of pace and struck up conversation, but…

…if this went on, it would actually make his hesitation worse.

“Whoops, sorry about that. We were talking about the matchmaking god!”

“Huh? …Oh, yes. Yes, that’s right.”

“I’m a little confused. What about it?”

“Well, let’s see… In that case, let me ask you an incredibly direct question.”

He finally steeled himself and asked. He was attempting to appropriate the words of a man who’d survived by coincidence alone, in order to rid himself of his own hesitation.

“Say the god of matchmaking is attempting to make a match. But in order to bring those people together, he has to do fantastic things, things that could never pass for coincidences, over and over. If he did, the god’s friends might realize that he wasn’t human.”

“Yeah…? Can they not find out that he’s a god?”

“He’s afraid that if they learn he’s a god, not only will they not thank him, they may think he’s creepy. Maybe they won’t be his friends anymore. In that case…what should the god do?”

Sham thought he’d been as direct as it was possible to be, but he was a little worried that Isaac might not have understood.

After mulling the idea over for a bit, Isaac gave a simple answer. “I think he could just do what he wants to.”

“…” He’d half expected as much, but it was a very straightforward answer. Still, the worry that he really might not have understood welled up inside him.

“Boy, the idea that someone might hate you really can worry you sick. I get that. I worry every day about what I’d do if Miria started to hate me!”

It was possible this was a genuine concern of his, given how Isaac’s expression turned unusually gloomy as he brooded.

However, before long, he asked Sham a question, looking slightly perplexed.

“But listen, that god’s worry about the…um…about those people who need him to match them up?”

“Hmm? Yes.”

“His worry *doesn’t make it wrong for him to help* those people. Right?”

“…?”

As you’d think, Isaac’s sudden suggestion confused Sham.

In the silence, the clatter of the train wheels just reverberated through them.

Isaac’s answer didn’t seem to follow from what they’d said before, but…when he spoke again, Sham felt that the idea was starting to come together, very slightly.

“If they hate him, then they hate him, and he can just think of a way to make up with them later! Besides, if he didn’t save them and they found out about it afterward… That would probably be more awkward, wouldn’t it?” Isaac could be both extremely childish and very mature, but his response was so innocent that Sham was taken aback.

“That’s true. After all, if you don’t act, nothing will happen, bad or good.”

“I’m still a little confused, but I’m sure you’re right!”

Isaac's reassurance was groundless, but Sham looked down with a weak smile.

I feel just a little better.

Isaac Dian. Talking to this man, who didn't think at all, might have been the right move.

With that vague thought in mind, Sham decided to spend the rest of the train journey to Chicago making small talk, as he'd done earlier.

As far as this body was concerned, at least.

That doesn't make it wrong to help.

I see. So that's another perspective.

…

Although, in my case, I'm not saving the other party—

—I'm using them.



Meanwhile, in Chicago The abandoned factory

It was getting gloomy in the delinquents' hideout.

The suture-scarred bomber still showed no sign of waking.

Now that they'd attracted the attention of the police, they couldn't carelessly check around outside. They'd reached a deadlock on several different fronts at once.

And in the midst of it all, a voice rang out, breaking through the clamor.

"Jacuzzi! Jacuzzi, are you here?!"

"Eep?! I-I'm here! I'm here, so don't hit me!"

Jacuzzi turned visibly pale at the sight of the friend who'd burst in, his face distorted with emotion. It wasn't that they usually hit him; he just couldn't seem to get used to his friends' rough voices.

"Moron! You think one of us would hit you?! I'll deck you for that!"

"Eeeeegh!"

"Never mind, just quit crying! I found him!"

"Ee… Huh? Y-you found him? Who's 'him'?"

The kid excitedly talking to Jacuzzi was one of the boys he'd befriended after he came to New York. His New York friends had nothing to do with the Chicago incident, but most of them had come along anyway, either for fun or because they were worried about Jacuzzi.

The guy running toward Jacuzzi was one of them, but…

"Graham!"

"?!"

At the abrupt news that Graham had been sighted, Jacuzzi's eyes began darting around in his still-pale face.

Nice and the other delinquents all turned to look at them when they heard the name, and the mood in the factory was suddenly tense.

"R-really?! That's terrific… We'll have to go get him right now! Wh-where?! Where is he?!" Jacuzzi cried with delight.

The young man hesitated for a moment, but then he rapidly described the situation, as if to say this was a race against time.

"You know the place called Dolce that's just up the road a bit?"

"N-no… Oh, I've never been inside, but I might have seen it. He—He's in there?!"

"It's an old bar. And…I dunno what's going on, but—"

And then… The instant he'd heard his friend's full report…Jacuzzi's growing smile froze up completely.

"Graham's in there in a death match against a guy who looks like a vampire and this doll in green!"



Meanwhile At Dolce

What was the situation in the bar like?

It could be summed up in a single word: *trashed*.

Several of the tables had been overturned, and some of the chairs lay in pieces.

"Erm, g-gentlemen? Miss?" the proprietor asked wearily, wearing a distressed smile. "You know, I believe humanity is inherently capable of mutual understanding."

Right now, it was all he could do to say those words, but his voice was too weak and faint for anybody to hear.

Least of all the three individuals who were tearing full throttle around the bar.

"Tomorrow morning, the sun may suddenly fail to rise, and we should brace ourselves for the possibility. Still, I think we must assume that it will indeed rise tomorrow and build a future in preparation for it."

He continued desperately, but again, nobody turned around.

Even so, the proprietor kept talking, as if the words were no longer intended to stop them, but to help him hang on to his own reason.

I hear you. I can hear you, old owner.

Responding silently in his heart, Christopher ducked under Sickle's incoming leg.

The next instant, Graham's enormous wrench swung down at him from above.

But even if you tell me to stop, it doesn't look like these other two are ready to settle down.

He rolled to the side to evade the blow, thinking the whole time.

…

"Hey, Sickle, listen. I get it, I understand, and I'm sorry, so would you just put your legs away for a little bit?"

He got to his feet, but Sickle, still sullen-faced, was bounding around as though she was trying to send both Graham and Christopher flying simultaneously.

"Shut up. Just let me kick you through the air once."

Sickle spun cleanly as she spoke, and Christopher heaved a deep sigh…

…smiling all the while.

Hmmmm. This is a problem. Let me take back what I just thought.

I actually am *enjoying myself.*

Yes, mortal combat is so much fun.

Maybe it's the thrill of living on the edge. It's what lets me…really feel death.

Tricks me into thinking that I might be a natural, living thing.

Funny, isn't it? If you think about it in the normal way, fighting to the death for any purpose other than eating should be an unnatural act.

I wonder if it's like how monkeys battle to be the alpha.

Christopher kept on fighting Graham, a formidable opponent, while blocking attacks from his friend.

Each wrench attack from Graham carried with it a sense of impending death.

Every time one whipped past the side of his head, he felt a thrill run through his heart, and he remembered the sensations he'd experienced a year ago.

The redheaded man he'd attacked, and who had proceeded to beat him without breaking a sweat…

…everything about him had been irregular.

Now, see, he *is an unnatural being. Utterly.*

At the same time, he remembered something else.

How afterward, he'd been stabbed in the back by a punk so insignificant Christopher couldn't even remember his name, and had nearly died.

"*I don't want to die*," he remembered murmuring.

It was a past he would have liked to forget, but it was engraved inside him as fact.

And…it had brought about an unexpected change in him.

As Christopher dodged a series of wrench attacks unleashed at a terrifying speed, he thought.

If he'd only had his beloved knife-guns with him, he would probably have been able to shut Wrench Guy up…

…permanently.

But he didn't want to.

Even if he'd had a gun— Would he have been able to put a bullet into this man's brain, or heart, or gut?

As he jumped back farther, evading a kick from Sickle, he answered his own question.

Nope. Couldn't do it.

Christopher was pretty surprised by the implications.

Aah, so it's true?

Fighting was so much fun, and yet…

It may be strange to say about a change in myself…but I'm not sure I like it.

Even though, every time death skimmed by him, he was able to feel truly alive.

I really…

Sometimes a child who thinks nothing of stomping on ants becomes an adult who, for some reason, hesitates to kill even harmful insects; the change in him might have been similar.

I…can't kill people anymore.

Christopher had once worked as a hitman on the side. He'd killed several dozen people, or maybe several hundred.

Had this change been triggered by losing to a human, or had it been his first near escape from death? Or was the cause something else entirely?

At any rate, the moment this ridiculous fact struck him—

—Christopher was smiling.

His mouth with its rows of sharp fangs was as wide as it could go while he kept dodging the silver death that closed in on him.

See? This is fun.

He couldn't kill, but his opponent kept sending certain death his way. The odds were stacked against him, but even so, Christopher's mind brimmed over with some sort of pleasant emotion.

This is its own *kind of fun!*

"Ha-ha…" In spite of himself, he laughed out loud.

"Ha-ha-ha!" Graham, who was springing around dynamically as he fought, laughed right back.

Something else about this must have seemed fun to him, too.

"…What's so funny?"

Only Sickle glared sullenly at the two of them in turn. When they'd both burst out laughing right in the middle of a fight, she'd probably felt that they weren't taking this seriously.

That said, it was the first time they'd all stopped moving in several minutes, and in that moment—

—a lukewarm liquid splashed over the three of them.

""""?!""""

None of them had any idea what had happened, and they wiped off their faces hastily.

At the same time, they knew what that liquid was. They couldn't help knowing.

The acrid smell that stung their nostrils was unmistakably alcoholic.

It was almost too strong, though—probably a pretty high-proof liquor.

When they looked around, wondering what was going on…

…they saw a child standing there, cool as a cucumber.

"Ricardoooo, what are you doing?" Christopher muttered.

Ricardo gave a small sigh. “Cool your heads. Also, try striking sparks just one more time. You’ll all burn up, and that’ll be the end of it.”

“W-wait!!”

The proprietor’s cry was almost a scream, and a completely new kind of tension ran through the bar.

In the hands of the young lady dressed like a boy was a bucket whose rim was wet with alcohol— And beside her stood a row of several empty bottles of tequila, the highest-proof liquor in the bar.

When he saw those empty bottles, Christopher thought, *That’s…*

True, it was strong liquor, but the alcohol content of that particular beverage was generally around 50 percent. In order to ignite, it would have had to be 70 percent.

Did Ricardo know that? Information about alcohol combustion was knowledge he himself had acquired after living a long time. She’d probably seen a street performer take a swig of vodka and spit fire and learned that alcohol was flammable, or something along those lines.

Even weaker alcohol could ignite under the right conditions—but in this situation, it probably wouldn’t have been possible to set them on fire.

Still, as she’d said, the evaporating alcohol had cooled his head and body. At the same time, the mucous membranes in his nose and throat burned from the fumes he’d inhaled, so did that cancel out the effect?

As he considered these trivial things, Graham had gone silent in apparent thought as well.

How much did he know about liquor ignition? Maybe he wasn’t thinking about whether it would burn at all and instead was thinking, *Fighting while on fire could be interesting, too*.

Christopher was arbitrarily imagining his opponent's thoughts, but in the course of their brief exchange, he seemed to have gotten a good handle on his personality.

Sickle also stood where she was, immobile, wearing a vinegary expression. A momentary silence descended in the bar.

However…that silence was shattered by the proprietor, who came dashing out from behind the counter.

"P-please! Please stop this!"

Making unreasonable demands of his aging body, the proprietor set his hands on the table wet with alcohol and bowed his head.

"Maybe you have good reason not to like each other! Maybe you have some old quarrel between you! Maybe there's some terribly profound history here that a nobody like me couldn't even begin to imagine! But still, please, calm yourselves! This may not be my fight, but this is my bar! As of today, it has been exactly thirty years since we opened this establishment! We haven't earned much, but my wife and I have done our very best here on our own! I'm well aware that that's nothing to do with you, sirs and miss, but I beg you, please, just for today… You don't even need to pay us for the food, but I implore you, just stop fighting! Even if it's only a single bite, at least—at least let my wife and me feel proud of our work today for this one order! That's all I want! So, so please, stop fighting! I'm begging you! Please…!"

With this impassioned speech, delivered on the brink of tears, the owner's pleas finally reached the people around him.

The phrases *exactly thirty years* and *my wife and I…on our own* made even Shaft and the Poet, who hadn't participated in the brawl, feel an indescribable guilt.

Desperately, the proprietor kept repeating, “Please! I beg you!” Christopher looked at him, then gazed at Ricardo, whose eyes were cold. Cocking his head to one side, he murmured:

“Erm, Ricardo?”

“What?”

“Am I the scum of the earth right now?”

“Mm-hmm. Everything from your face to your behavior. And while I’m at it, so am I, for wasting that liquor.” Oddly, Ricardo looked apologetic.

Meanwhile, Shaft and the others timidly approached the unmoving Graham.

“Uh, Mr. Graham? You’re the one at fault here. Seriously, can’t you at least be considerate enough to take this stuff outside?”

“…”

“After all, Mr. Graham, you started it by throwing that wrench. The woman in green from the wanted poster woulda been one thing, but at young master Ricardo’s bodyguard? You’re always lobbin’ wrenches at us; that’s why you can’t control yourself now. Do you understand?”

As Shaft lectured him, his voice gradually regained its former tone. Thumping his own shoulder with the huge wrench, Graham murmured.

“Yeah… Let me tell you a touching, touching story.”

“Hunh?”

“Just now, the owner here didn’t tell us to get out or anything like it, not even once. What does that mean? Is he afraid of us? But if he was, he coulda just called the police and left it at that… No, he went out of his way to come out here and face this group of extremely

dangerous people, and he didn't even tell us to scram. All he said was 'Let us feel proud of our work.' He must hate our guts, and he's still treating us like customers, see? How could I not call that touching?"

"No, uh, Mr. Graham? It's really not okay for you to say that, you know."

Shaft's criticism was completely natural, but Graham didn't flinch.

"Yeah, you said it! I don't have the right to talk about it! Who's the one who shattered that poignant emotion? Me! What bone did I have to pick with this bar? None whatsoever, and I still busted their tables and walls and the owner's special day! If an abstract idea like self-hatred suddenly becomes visible, what should I do? Right, I should look in a mirror! What a crime… How am I supposed to—?"

Ignoring Graham's nonsense, which seemed likely to go on for quite a while, Sickle spoke to the owner briefly. Her face was calm. "Sorry, barkeep. It's all my fault. I'll pay any damages you ask for." Then, walking over to the Poet, she spoke in a low voice only he could hear. "I feel awful that I couldn't restrain myself. This kinda thing is probably why my master refused to teach me true capoeira."

Sickle was clearly irritated with herself, and the Poet chose to remain silent. Right now, no matter how meaningless his nonsense was, she would probably be quiet and accept it.

Which was why he kept his mouth shut.

After all, even if they were only a means to demonstrate his lunacy, he had his own small pride in his verbal stylings.

When he saw that the three of them had settled down, the proprietor just kept repeating, "Th-thank you so much! Your food is cooking right now!"

His gratitude stirred up a merciless sense of guilt in the people around him. In this situation, howling for them to get out would have been preferable, and an uncomfortable silence filled the bar.

“Hey…” Ricardo, sitting quietly at the bar, broke that silence.

The girl in boys’ clothing glanced back and forth between Graham and Christopher, and asked them a question with a sigh.

“I didn’t ask Chris, but… What was this fight about anyway?”

It was a simple enough question, and the most important one, but—

“Huh?” “Huh?”

The two both looked like pigeons who’d just been shot with a popgun.

They found it a little odd that she was calling their deadly brawl just a fight, but come to think of it, they had no real reason to try to kill each other.

“You’re both involved with the same family; you’re comrades. Why are you out for each other’s blood?”

“Well, that is true, but…”

“…Why are we? I don’t even understand the principles behind my own behavior… It is a mystery.”

They racked their brains, desperately trying to remember what had brought them into conflict in the first place, and then—

““Oh, right!””

They each smacked their knee at the same time.

“It was because this wise guy started mouthing off about protectin’ that kid with the railroad scars,” Graham said.

Christopher threw out his chest as if this were a competition and gave his own answer.

“It was me. First, I wanted to rediscover the feeling of fighting for my life, like rehab. Oh, and I’d heard he dislocated joints for Sickle and Chi, my beloved family-slash-friends, and I figured I should avenge them, I guess!”

“…You ‘guess’?” Sickle was standing near the back of the bar, and when she heard him tack on the last half of his reply as an afterthought, her temples twitched visibly. “So I’m lower on your priority list than rehab…?”

Pretending he hadn’t heard Sickle’s angry comment, Christopher averted his face and scratched his head. “Uh, well, now that I’m thinking about it, I suppose our reasons for trying to kill each other didn’t warrant doing this to the bar. I mean, um, I hope you know I do regret it?”

“Regrets won’t fix the bar,” Ricardo coldly replied, and Christopher uncomfortably turned to face the other way.

Sickle was over there, which presented a problem for Christopher, and he kept right on turning in a full circle.

As if they’d been pulled in by the spiral of his comical twirling…

…with truly excellent timing, *they* flew into the bar.

“Graham!”

When the tattooed kid broke into the awkward atmosphere…

“Hunh…?”

“What— What’s this?”

Graham and Christopher spoke at the exact same time.

“Jacuzzi? What’re you doing here, kid?”

“Aah! Oh, Graham, that’s terrific! You’re okay…”

Graham sounded the same as ever, and the tattooed young man was relieved— But then he fell silent.

He'd seen the vampiric man who stood in the center of the bar.

Those red eyes and that mouth full of canines made for an extremely vivid memory.

As the group of delinquents came crowding into the bar behind him, the young man with the tattoo kept opening and shutting his mouth uselessly.

Seeing the boy's wide-eyed trembling, Christopher was now certain.

"Hi there," he said. "It has been a while, hasn't it? Although I don't know your names."

With an innocent, fang-filled smile on his face, he made a cruel remark with no malice behind it:

"You were Tim's little pawns during the Mist Wall affair, weren't you?"



In a dream

("Blow it up,") they whispered.

They're whispering right next to my ear.

("Blow it up.")

Again. They said it again.

I know. You don't have to tell me; I know already.

I want to blow it up, too. Everything. I want to take this awful world and blow away every bit of it.

"No. That's not it, is it?"

Huh?

"It's not that you want to blow it up. You have *to. That's what you were born to do."*

What are you talking about?

"The world appreciates explosives because they flare and burst. Perhaps that way of thinking treats the human perspective as most important, but if it weren't for them, the concept of explosives wouldn't exist, so we should defer to them. Had dolphins been the ones to invent explosives, the role of explosives would fall in accordance with dolphin values… Although I don't know what dolphins would have used explosives for. The same is true of you."

I don't get it.

"No, I'm fairly sure you do. Your mental age was somewhere around twelve, but your comprehension and knowledge are higher than that. So you know what the words mean, you're just unable to accept it. That's all."

…So I could accept it if I was an adult?

"The definition of adult *is nebulous, but at the very least, they would consider whether to accept it or struggle against it."*

Like I care about that?

"True, I'm not certain that it applies to you. You aren't human, after all; you're something we made. Now that does lead to the question 'What is human?' but let's save that debate for another time. Provided you live long enough, that is."

No! Don't screw with me.

Look, I may not get all of this, but I do know this much.

Right now, you're making fun of me.

You're insulting me.

Gah, that's right, it's the voice. This is the voice.

I thought it sounded familiar, and I was right. I can't see his face, but it's him.

Huey! Huey Laforet…!

I yelled, and the voice vanished. The feeling that someone was there has disappeared, too.

…

Oh, guess I was dreaming just now.

Yeah, it was a dream. That damn bastard Huey never said anything like that.

The ones who did were the Rhythm researchers.

My head just switched Huey with the person who said it, that's all. But I'm positive I wasn't wrong.

…

…

Aah, I'm scared.

I'm scared to open my eyes.

Once they're open, I know I'll see this awful world.

I wonder what happened to me.

…Oh yeah. Those creeps were trying to take Sham away. I blew them up, and I blew me up, too, and then some other creeps came, and I thought they were going to get in my way so I blew them up, blew them up, blew them up, blew them up, blew them up, blew them up… Aaaaaaaaaah, this is such a waste of time, and so is thinking, and so is remembering.

What should I do? What am I supposed to do?

Is blowing things up really the only way?

Blow up the world I can see. All of it, all of it, all of it!

Which means— Maybe… Maybe the best thing would be to blow myself up.

If I do, everything, all of it, every last thing would disappear, right?

…But at least…

At least I have to save Frank before that, or…or pulverize that lady with glasses, or Huey…

…By the way.

I wonder what's happening to me right now?



The abandoned factory

When Rail nervously cracked open his eyes, he didn't recognize where he was, but *it was nostalgic all the same*.

When he and Frank had traveled together, they'd often sheltered from the rain in abandoned factories.

Even when they'd been taking life one day at a time— They'd always been under Huey's thumb.

No matter where they hid, Sham and Hilton would appear out of nowhere, bringing their next orders.

As he reflected, Rail slowly tried to get a handle on his current situation.

Apparently, he hadn't been collared by the cops, but this wasn't a hospital, and he didn't think he'd just passed out back in the alley.

For one thing, this was a completely different location.

Where was he? He looked around, trying to figure it out, and just then—

“Oh! He woke up!”

He heard the voice of an innocent-sounding woman.

When he looked over toward it, a blond girl in red was peeking in at him.

“Are you okay?”

She gently dabbed at his face with a towel. Even before he could think about who she was, several young people swarmed in from behind her.

“Hey, she’s right. His eyes are open.”

“You okay?”

“Those are some wicked scars. Are you like that all over?”

“Whoa, you can’t just ask somebody that out of nowhere!”

“Does your head hurt?” “Hya-haah.” “Hya-haw?”

What? What are these people?

Rail felt his understanding of the current situation slipping even further out of reach, and an emotion that could have been labeled as either irritation or unease welled up inside him.

The warm assurances, the banter—they all just sounded like static to him.

For now…

I’ll blow them up, Rail thought, reaching into his jacket. Then he realized the contents were missing, and his whole body stiffened.

———?!

His bombs were gone.

For Rail, those extremely dangerous, egg-shaped weapons were also his shield. At this point, the high-performance bombs might well

become his means of killing himself as well— And they'd vanished without a trace.

Hastily, he checked the pouch that he always wore at his waist, but the pouch itself was gone.

"…Ah…"

Rail's mouth flapped uselessly, and he felt sweat breaking out all over his body.

His bombs had been taken.

Were the thuggish-looking group that surrounded him the culprits? No, that didn't matter now.

Rail understood with sickening, utter clarity:

Without his bombs, he couldn't do a thing.

He couldn't kill people, couldn't escape, couldn't end his own life.

His bombs were the one weapon he could use to destroy the world, and they'd been taken away from him. His pulse was unpleasantly loud as he took another look at his surroundings.

The people around him seemed to be a bunch of teenagers and kids. The overwhelming majority were boys, but it was hard to tell just what kind of group they were. If he'd had to say, he would have gone with "gang of delinquents," but the woman in the red dress tending to him didn't strike him as a hoodlum.

Now that he was awake, the woman spoke to him again.

"Are you okay? There's nothing to be afraid of. The doctor looked at you a little bit ago, and he said you've just got some mild bruises and burns! They'll be all better once you lie down for a little. That's a relief, isn't it?"

The way she spoke sounded fairly childish for her apparent age, and Rail wasn't sure how to respond.

He didn't know who they were. He couldn't see them being in league with those men in black who'd kidnapped Sham… Well, with the white-coat-garbed group from yesterday. If they had been, he would probably be strapped down on a bed in a laboratory right about now.

"Miss…? Who are you people?"

He just barely managed to get the words out.

"I'm Miria! Nice to meet you! We're all friends here, so you don't have to worry! It's okay!"

There was nothing wicked about her smile, but that itself made Rail uneasy. After all, the woman researcher in the lab coat had worn this same sort of guileless smile.

"…What…happened to me? Why am I…here…?"

He couldn't really remember what had happened around the time he passed out. He'd probably been pretty confused. He remembered blowing up the men in black, along with Sham and himself, but…

The answer to Rail's question came from a figure who pushed to the front of the delinquents.

"Your bomb went off. We have our reasons why we can't hand you over to the police, so I'm afraid we just went ahead and brought you here."

The polite explanation came from a badly scarred woman who wore glasses over an eye patch.

Hers weren't suture scars like his. Her skin was littered with countless irregular slashes, and there were painful-looking burn scars around the eye patch over her right eye.

She's like…me?

He felt a sort of kinship with this fellow scar-covered individual, but then those thoughts were temporarily driven from his mind.

Rail had seen his bomb pouch in the woman's right hand.

"…—! Give that back!"

Flustered, he tried to stand, but his entire body was racked with dull pains, and he fell to his knees.

"Aah! No, no, don't push yourself!"

The woman who'd said her name was Miria hastily hugged his shoulders, but Rail ignored her. Muttering, he repeated what he'd just said to the woman with the eye patch.

"Please…give that back."

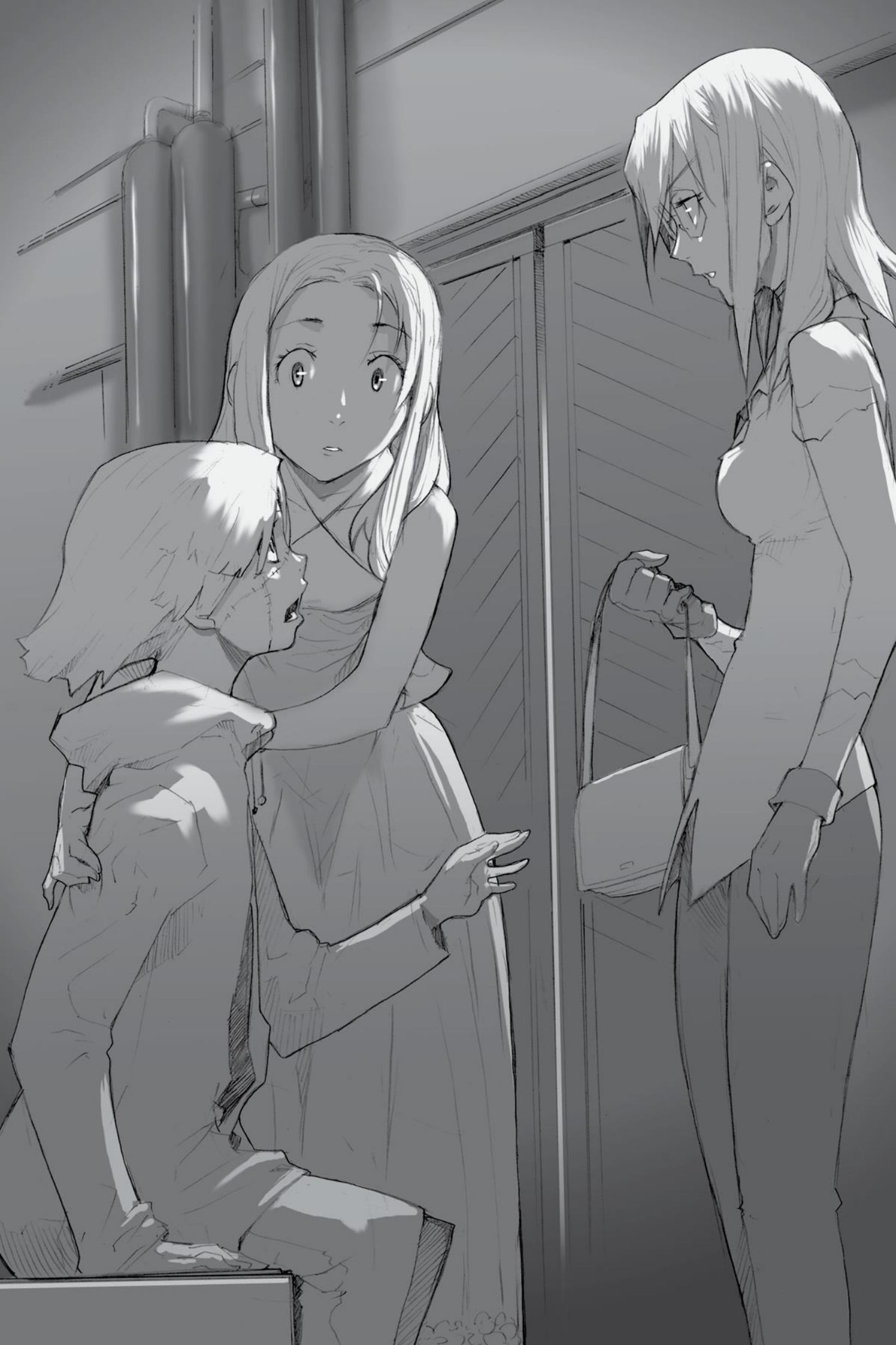
"I apologize for taking it without permission, but I thought it might be unwise to leave bombs and an unconscious child together."

"So you know they're bombs."

She knows.

I'll have to get rid of her…

Rail made the decision easily. Nice seemed to pick up on what he was intending; sighing, she shook her head and calmly asked him a question.



“I’ll return them to you if you’ll tell me one thing. Where on earth did you get these bombs?”

“…?”

What was she talking about? Did her group want some, too?

Like these jokers could use them right! Plus, even if they tried to get more, there probably weren’t any on the market at this point.

With that in mind, Rail decided to answer, grudgingly.

“…I just bought up some explosives that were floating around Hollywood and construction sites. I did the processing.”

Huey was the one who’d taught him how, but the fact annoyed him, so he didn’t mention his name.

But oddly, in that instant, the behavior of the delinquents around them changed.

“I knew it.” “See? What’d I tell you?” “Miz Nice is the one who ‘told us.’” “I thought so, too.” “Hya-haah.” “Uh, so then, what? Does that mean we were the ones who caused those explosions?” “No, the fellas who made those explosives did.” “You’re the one who said we should sell ’em to Hollywood.” “Can it! Not like I can control what happens to ’em after they’re sold!” “Jacuzzi’s the one who said we should steal the explosives; it’s his fault.” “Nah, Miz Nice was the one who said she wanted ’em.” “Then it’s not his fault.” “Yeah, it’s nobody’s fault.” “It was an accident.” “An unfortunate accident.” “Hya-haw.”

The stir was concluded in mere moments, and then one of the boys cleared his throat and turned to Rail.

“So, uh, verdict is, it’s nobody’s fault. Lucky, huh!”

“Wh-what is?”

“Well, uh, you were probably the one behind the mess in Chicago yesterday, yeah? And that explosion that almost blew Jacuzzi away a minute ago. But we’ve decided that none of it was your fault…is what I meant.”

“…Why?” Rail retorted involuntarily, straight-faced.

He couldn’t follow this conversation. It made him feel the same way he felt when he talked to Christopher and the Poet.

The one who answered him was the woman in the red dress.

“Hmm. I’m not sure I’m keeping up, either, but they’re saying somebody forgives you! I don’t know who it was, but you can just assume it was somebody you like.”

“…”

He really couldn’t follow this.

In a way, it was worse than a murderer thinking a confession at a church would be enough to earn forgiveness.

Who were these guys anyway?

Even as he thought this, a figure surfaced in Rail’s mind at Miria’s words.

Christopher.

Come to think of it, Christopher probably would just smile and forgive him for setting off bombs. Granted, he’d kill people himself with that very same smile on his face, so it was no reason to relax, but…

“What…are you going to do with me?”

Rail had lost his intent to kill them, and as he asked the question, his shoulders slumped quietly.

They'd taken his bombs, after all, and he had no chance of beating this group with physical strength. For now, he should probably learn about them, then come up with a way to retake his weapons.

And while those thoughts were running through his head, someone tossed his pouch to him.

"Huh?!"

Rail hastily caught the bag full of explosives. The woman with the eye patch smiled at him.

"You answered my question for me, so I'm giving them back," she murmured quietly.

Rail quickly opened the pouch. All the egg-shaped bombs were there, including the ones he'd had in his clothes. The few that seemed to be missing were probably the ones he'd used.

"…"

Rail had recovered the weapons he'd need to vaporize everyone around him with startling ease, but that ease struck him as unsettling. He stopped.

They hadn't done anything to the bombs, had they?

He didn't trust these people completely, so he couldn't be throwing them around willy-nilly just yet.

With that contradiction on his mind, Rail gulped. When he did, a jolt of pain ran through his chest and back, but it was probably from injuries he'd sustained from his own explosives.

"…You know these are bombs, right?"

"Yes. Little wonders, aren't they?"

…Wonders?

The woman's response struck him as odd, but Rail went on.

“You sure it’s a good idea to give bombs to kids?”

The sneer in his words sounded a bit more like himself.

For her part, Nice didn’t seem bothered by his scorn.

“Well, I wouldn’t call it a good idea, but I have no reason to take you to task for it.”

“?”

Rail looked perplexed, and the woman with the eye patch continued, calmly.

Her expression was almost rapturous, as if she was remembering some especially fond memories.

And just a little, ever so slightly…

…what she said next pulled the bomb fiend’s heart back into the world he had rejected.

“After all, when I was your age…*I blew up lakes and buildings and things myself*!”



At Dolce

“What’s going on? We’ve got even more loonies now.”

As she wiped the residual liquor from her face with a handkerchief, Sickle sized up the intruders.

The group of thuggish types were chattering away. A young man with a rugged tattoo on his face was at the head of the group, which included an enormous Mexican man and Asians in shady-looking costumes.

At first Sickle had thought that kid with the ink might be the ringleader, but the fact that he looked flustered, miserable, and ready to cry was giving her second thoughts.

Even stranger, the group seemed to know Christopher as well as the man in the blue coveralls.

That said, considering how frightened the tattooed one looked, the relationship was not a good one.

“Friends of yours, Chris?” Sickle asked him straight-out.

The red-eyed monster gave an awkward smile. “Hmm. They’re more Tim’s group’s friends than mine. Well, more like participants in Huey’s experiment.”

“And why does the sight of you scare them?”

“Adele and I came very close to killing them a while back.”

“…Okay, I get the picture.” Sighing with resignation, Sickle cracked her neck, then turned back to Graham. “Well, what do you wanna do? Keep fighting?”

Graham thought about it, toying with his wrench with both hands. Then he spoke, looking indifferent.

“Course I do. It’s just seein’ as today is the joint’s thirtieth anniversary, I’ll celebrate by sittin’ this one out. You?”

“I’ll call a truce on one condition: I wanna hear who hired you people. Who is that group in the lab coats?” Sickle again asked directly, somewhat calmer.

However, Graham was nonplussed. “What group in lab coats?”

“Don’t play dumb.”

“?”

Graham looked genuinely mystified, and Sickle's temples started to twitch again. Seeing this, Shaft hastily went up to Graham and helped him out.

"You know! She means the ones who shot up Russo's place the day before yesterday!"

"Ohh! Them, huh?! …Yeah, who were they anyway?"

"Well, uh, the top brass was goin' on about Placido's regular checkup, but I didn't hear the specifics… The family's scattered all over the place now, so there's no way to find out."

He was almost speaking more for Sickle's benefit than for Graham's. Sickle picked up on the man's intent, and it convinced her that Graham's posse really didn't know anything about the group in lab coats.

Graham appeared to ponder the mystery of the white-coat-clad group for a little while. Then, as if he'd lost interest, he smacked his wrench and smiled at Sickle again.

"Well, whatever. You people were on that wanted poster, so we're still on the clock."

He smiled, apparently pleased by the fact that their struggle wasn't over yet, and the tension in the bar began to build again—until a quiet, resonant voice defused it.

"About that wanted poster…"

Graham and the others turned to see Ricardo, who'd gone over to stand beside Christopher.

They hadn't interacted with the kid much, but he was technically their employer's grandchild. Graham was listening for the moment, and Ricardo quite calmly spoke. "We can't get in contact with my grandpa, so I think the job probably isn't valid anymore."

"…"

"I have no idea where Mr. Krieck and the others went, either. Frankly, I get the feeling that Grandpa's already dead."

Simple as that.

Without a single pause, Ricardo had told them a member of his family was probably deceased. It made everyone else feel incredibly uncomfortable.

"…Question for you, Shaft."

"About what?"

"What story should a man tell at a time like this?"

"None at all, probably…"

Shaft responded with a perfectly natural answer, but Graham kept on talking.

"A sad story? A fun one? The story of my fleeting first love, which combines the two? Y'see, a while back, my flesh-and-blood big sister told me, 'We found you on the riverbank, you little skunk!' So then I asked, 'Then can you and me get married, sis?' and she grabbed one of the wrenches Dad used for work, hauled off, and walloped me with it! The sparks were flyin', I was fallin' head over heels, and I was gettin' dumped all in the same moment. Our romance lasted less than a second. Still, that was how she reassured me we really were blood-related siblings, and I gave up on my love, but I think if you can give it up that easy, it prob'ly ain't love at all!"

"Pervert…" Shaft groaned, covering his face with a hand.

"Anyway, it really is better not to fight here! The police are already on alert!"

"The police… I see… The tale of my first encounter with the cops is a—"

“What’s with you anyway?! You’re even less coherent than usual! …Wait… Mr. Graham, don’t tell me… Did you get drunk from getting splashed with liquor?! Mr. Graham! Your face is bright red! Mr. Graham?!”

“Anyway, if we find some of our syndicate’s men, we’ll be able to make sense of what’s going on. If we fight here, we’ll all lose out.”

Completely ignoring Shaft and Graham’s conversation, Ricardo went on.

“Just fighting with that fellow in the coveralls was pretty fulfilling for me, you know.”

“I wasn’t including you, Chris.”

“Whaaat? We’re friends and you didn’t include me in the group? Does that mean you’re treating me as a part of you? Am I your second self?”

Paying zero attention to Christopher’s dumb joke, Ricardo turned to Sickle and the others confidently.

“I don’t have a total grasp on the situation, but I get the feeling that we’ve all been pulled into a *series of events* that spells some serious trouble. If nothing changes, we’ll end up destroying one another, so… I think we should join forces and put two and two together.”

“…No objections here. That guy in the coveralls aside, we need to ask Chris about Rail and Frank.”

Agreeing with Ricardo’s suggestion, Sickle let her violent aura fade.

Beside her, she noticed the Poet was frowning, but she assumed he was probably just coming up with another string of nonsense. She continued the conversation without worrying about it.

Meanwhile, the delinquents were completely lost, and they nervously approached Graham.

“Um… Uh, Graham, we have no idea what’s going on here…”

“Heya, Jacuzzi… Whoa, I sobered up… Okay, I see what’s goin’ on. Sorry for neglecting you guys. Before I ask what you’re doing here, I want to say I’m sorry. Let me deliver my apology right now!”

Oh, this is probably going to take a while.

Jacuzzi braced himself, preparing for one of Graham’s long soliloquies, but—

—as the man in question twirled his wrench, he was turning his head as well.

When his eyes landed on the proprietor, they stopped dead—and then he meekly spoke to Jacuzzi and his gang. “Uh… Jacuzzi. Before that, there’s something I’d like you to help me with.”

“Huh?”

Graham was unusually subdued. His eyes were completely hidden behind his bangs, and his lips apologetically mumbled:

“Would you…help me fix this place up?”

Watching the group of confused young delinquents from a distance, the Poet thought to himself:

There are more odd ones here now.

Their arrival wasn’t exactly coincidental; the tattooed youth seems to have been searching for Graham. However…

…no matter how raucous we were, could they really have found this establishment so quickly?

Something’s peculiar here.

*We still don’t know the details of Master Huey’s experiment…*and yet the situation is resolving all on its own.

What can it mean?

Why does it feel so eerie? It's as if someone is cleverly manipulating us…

This strange feeling—it's almost like…Sham or Hilton's…

When he'd thought that far, the Poet quietly shook his head.

…Were we the captive Alices after all, then?

In that case…who is the White Rabbit?

As he scanned the now densely populated bar, the Poet murmured briefly, in a voice no one else could hear.

"Who…is betraying whom?"

Interlude IV: The Daughter Is Fanatically Devoted to Her Father

Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary The dining hall

“…So. What do you think’s gonna happen to us now?”

“…”

As Ladd muttered in a low voice, sounding amused, Firo’s only response was to take a bite of pasta in silence.

It was the day after Firo had gouged out Huey’s eye.

In the end, a guard who was one of the Shams had said, “I’ll take you two back up top. We can’t have you in contact with Huey anymore,” and they’d been returned to Broadway that morning.

The Sham who was Dragon, the Asian man, was already back in the adjacent cell, and Huey’s eyeball had apparently been taken out of the prison.

Firo’s cell wasn’t near Ladd’s; they hadn’t even spoken since the incident, but when lunchtime rolled around, they met in the dining hall again.

The dining hall looked as cold and institutional as always, but it was heaven compared to the underground cells.

Plus, the aroma of the soup that reached his nose was painting his world in bright color again.

“Wanna know how I’m feeling right now? I’m like a rug rat who just got his hands on a new toy, but better. Like the king of the playground who just found a ton of bugs for squishing and started wondering what color guts are gonna squirt out when he stomps on ’em. It’s kinda like that. I kid you not, I couldn’t even sleep.”

“Would you lay off the bug-squishing metaphors when people are trying to eat?”

The baby-faced young man looked disgusted, but even then, he kept silently shoveling food into his mouth.

It was the first time Firo had eaten with Ladd in several days, and unlike the last time, Isaac wasn’t between them. He’d heard they’d let him go that morning, but Firo was worried about whether he’d actually been released safely.

Maybe Huey, or whoever had ordered Huey’s eyeball, had him tied up somewhere.

All that aside, I doubt Victor would let him go that easily.

As a matter of fact, due to the trouble in New York, Victor was having problems sending and receiving orders, and so Isaac had been released. But at this point in time, Firo had no way of knowing—or even guessing—this, and the possibility that Huey might harm them somehow was always in a corner of his mind.

Noticing Firo’s sigh, Ladd spoke to him with a grin.

“I don’t wanna see you sighin’, Firo. I’ll tell ya a million times if I have to! Sighs don’t make anything happen, and they stain your mind with boredom. Boredom’s poison; it’ll rot your life.”

“At least try to enjoy being bored, all right?”

“Yeah, up until I was twenty or so, my pals and me tried all kinds of stuff to keep ourselves entertained. One time, I stormed the chairman’s office of this company, Nebula.”

“…Nebula? You mean *the* Nebula?”

Firo had meant to let Ladd’s reply go in one ear and out the other, but when he heard that word, the question left his mouth before he could stop it.

Nebula was such a huge conglomerate that it was practically a household name.

Even among denizens of the underworld like Firo, it was a big name, a synonym for the American dream.

And Ladd had dropped that name indifferently, like it meant nothing to him.

“Yeah, we had a bet. I told some old pals of mine, ‘If I don’t like a fella, I don’t care who he is, I’ll slaughter him,’ and they said, ‘Well then, what about the guy who’s kicking back way up at the top of that building?’ And one thing led to another.”

“…I never heard anything about their chairman getting offed, though.”

“Well, I got in there okay, but after that… See, it turns out he was the most boring type there is to kill. This old guy seemed ready to die anytime. So I just went home and—” Ladd abruptly cut off before he could continue his story.

“Hey there. Sorry to bust in on your fun,” said a man, sitting down beside Firo. It was Dragon. The Asian man flashed his sharp canines in a smile, and Firo responded with emphatic silence.

Ladd was wearing an odd expression, but Dragon spoke before he could say anything. “I’ve got a word of warning for you.”

“A what?”

“We don’t plan to mess with you guys anymore. Frankly, we don’t want to get hurt.”

Rubbing the raw wound on his face, the Asian Sham sent Ladd a heavy-lidded glare.

Firo was terrified Ladd would take a sudden swing at the guy. Ladd seemed to have something on his mind, though; he kept eating, just listening in silence.

“But Huey, he’s probably a different story… Well, not Huey so much as Leeza.”

“…”

“I’m not gonna beat around the bush. That kid’s not normal.”

What is this guy saying? Sham had said something unexpected, and Firo let his surprise show. *He’s not exactly one to talk, is he?*

True, it was hard to describe a girl in a prison like this as anything other than “not normal,” but even so, she had to be normal enough compared to someone like Sham… That was what Firo thought anyway.

However, Dragon snickered quietly, then coolly continued.

“You’ll see soon. Well, you’re immortal, so I doubt you’ll die, but…that’s a good reason to be extra careful she doesn’t just kill you over and over.”

“…”

“That kid—Leeza—is a fanatic. Her dad is the whole world to her. It’s like Ennis and the Martillo Family for you—the streets of New York, things like that. To her, all that is concentrated in one guy, Huey Laforet.”

“What are you getting at?”

Firo had just finished his last bite, and at his question, the smile abruptly vanished from Dragon’s face.

“I’m saying that you, and our group, took part of that world. And you’re the one who actually did the deed. Say some bastard took Ennis from you. What would you do?”

"…"

He didn't even have to think about that.

However, Firo had only ever seen the girl when she was unconscious. He had the vague feeling he'd heard the name "Leeza" somewhere before, but he couldn't remember where, so he decided not to trouble himself about it.

"As far as that kid is concerned, her dad is an object of worship—her god. Anybody who tries to take that away…"

Dragon seemed to be trying to stir up his unease, but…

Ladd cut him off. "I've heard that somewhere before."

"Huh?"

"Come to think of it, I thought that kid looked familiar…" Ladd gritted his teeth as if he was remembering something, and a brutal smile lit his eyes as he asked, "She doesn't have a big sister named Chané, does she?"

"…Heh-heh! Heh-heh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yeah, you're right. It's exactly what it looks like!"

"Huh…?"

Chané. Chané…

Firo knew he'd heard that name before. He thought about it for a while, and then…

…suddenly, the image of his redheaded childhood friend flickered through his mind.

Huh? Come to think of it, I don't run into him all that often, but whenever I do, he's with that doll who doesn't say much. And her name was…

A jolt of electricity ran through Firo.

They do look alike.

He'd been really curious to know what kind of weirdo would agree to be Claire's girl, so he remembered her very clearly…and just now, he'd realized her face looked a whole lot like Huey Laforet's.

"Hang on. About Chané; can I ask—?"

Just as Firo tried to ask for details, the bell that signaled the end of the meal rang.

Dammit… Well, he's in the next cell over. I'll ask him later.

For the moment, Firo swallowed his question, shutting it away in his heart.

Unlike him, Ladd asked his question to Dragon's back as he cleared his dishes. "So I haven't gotten your answer from last night yet."

"Last night?"

"About Lua."

Unusually, there was no smile in Ladd's voice. Just as unusually, Dragon gave an awkward grin.

"Right… I have bad news for you."

Instantly, the air around Ladd turned cold and sharp—but only for a moment.

"She got away."

Shaking his head with a wry smile, he offered one more rather unnecessary addition.

"And Mr. Placido…is probably dead."

⟺

At the same time The special underground cell

"…Why…?"

A young girl's voice echoed in the large cell.

The deep despair in her question seemed liable to call down misfortune on anyone who heard it—a roiling mixture of doubt and anger and impatience.

"What's…happening…?" Leeza bolted up from the bed.

"What's the matter, Leeza?" Huey asked from the chair. "It doesn't look as though you've had a nightmare."

He was holding an open newspaper with a strange name, the *Daily Days*—probably something Sham had brought in as a guard—and he'd been absorbed in reading a variety of articles as if they intrigued him.

"F-Father…"

Even her beloved father's words couldn't dispel the girl's misery. On the contrary, she seemed to grow more discouraged. Tears filled her eyes, and she shook her head.

"I'm—I'm… Nooo… NOOOOooo…"

"Calm down, please. It's all right."

Deciding that his daughter's situation was serious, Huey folded the newspaper and quietly crossed to her. Gently putting an arm around her thin shoulders, he embraced her.

"I'm here. Don't worry."

At Huey's baseless attempt at comfort, Leeza's despair faded just a little, but she still sounded as if she was about to cry. Nearly shrieking, she managed to say:

"Father… Father! I'm… I was… *Lots of the me's in Chicago got kidnapped!*"

After hearing Leeza's report, Huey thought for a while.

His daughter was crouched on the bed, discouraged, and he seemed to have decided to let her be.

Leeza's consciousness had been given the name "Hilton," and like Sham, she was scattered all across America. To be perfectly accurate, it wasn't Leeza's consciousness, but the consciousness of the liquid which had taken over her memories and knowledge. However, Huey had considered it pointless to differentiate between the two, and he'd continued to raise her as Leeza Laforet.

He'd stationed a particularly large number of individual Hiltons in Chicago, and apparently they were being kidnapped by a mysterious group in black.

Most likely the work of Maestra Parmedes…

As he was visualizing his bespectacled former teacher, footsteps echoed in the corridor, and one of the guard Shams entered the room.

He'd unlocked the door a little more roughly than he usually did, and the first words out of his mouth were:

"Master Huey, we have a problem."

His tone was calm as he began to deliver his report.

"What's the matter? Has Rail told me to die again?"

Remembering the message from ever-rebellious Rail from an hour ago, Huey gave a quiet, wry smile.

"No, I've actually lost track of Rail at the moment. After the explosives work a short while ago, a little trouble broke out in Chicago, so I've come to deliver a report on that."

"Trouble?"

"Someone has been kidnapping the bodies I have in that city, one after another."

Although he was relating the exact same information as Leeza, Sham's delivery was composure itself.

"You too, Sham?!"

At Sham's impassive report, Leeza involuntarily raised her head—and her voice—from the bed.

Leeza hated Rail, and so she'd left the bombings he'd plotted in Chicago to Sham, but— Regardless of their respective actions, someone had been kidnapping bodies from both of them in rapid succession.

"Apparently, things are beginning to shift in earnest in the city of Chicago."

There's no doubt that this is Renee's doing, but…

…the question is, how is she obtaining information about Sham's and Hilton's bodies?

As a rule, only Huey, the members of Rhythm, and the individuals themselves knew which humans had had their lives taken over by the twins.

Had Renee learned of Sham's and Hilton's true nature and discovered a way of spotting them that even Huey didn't know? Or…

Huey considered a variety of hypotheses, but before long, he smiled faintly.

"Sham, an order. As previously discussed, please stall Victor and his men in New York in accordance with the Code Twenty-three plan. Begin the moment the incident is reported in the media, or whenever the fact reaches their ears."

"Understood, sir." Sham answered mechanically.

Huey thought a bit more, then added, “Before you act, tell Victor the following: ‘I’m afraid I’m going to cause trouble for you, Victor, and I’m sorry.’”

“Understood.”

“And then… Yes, please add, ‘I apologize for adding to that trouble, but…I can’t afford to involve you in the relationship between myself and Nebula at this point, and so— I’m going to tie you down just a little longer.’ If you say that, I expect he’ll understand.”

Then, imagining how flustered Victor was likely to get, Huey chuckled.

“Well, he may *understand*, but I doubt he’ll accept it…”

“And I’m certain he won’t forgive me.”



Even as she listened to her father and Sham…

…Leeza wasn’t focused on their conversation.

Internally, her mind was merely gazing at her own world, traveling to and from places that could have been either deep or shallow.

Why?

Why is this happening?

Why does Father have to be burdened this way?

He’s amazing.

He’s perfect.

He’s far, far more magnificent than anything else in the world, and yet…

Something’s strange.

Over the past few days, something—something about my world slipped out of place.

Where? What was it that slipped?

Where did the thread begin to unravel?

Up until just a little while ago, everything was going so well, but…

Did it start when Father lost his left eye?

When that Ladd guy slugged me?

When that jerk Graham got in our way in Chicago?

Everything—everything!—went perfectly before!

Here in this prison, Father and I could do anything, and now…

…

Him.

It was him.

It's his fault.

When he came to the island, something definitely started to slip*.*

He came here and fouled up the air.

He poisoned this place.

Because he came, Father is worried.

He stirred up Ladd, and that's why he hit me.

Maybe he took Ladd's chains off.

And what I can't forgive more than anything, anything, anything—

—he hurt my father.

He gouged out Father's left eye.

He's my father—mine and nobody else's. His eye used to look at me, only me, and I used to look right back—and then he stole it. Defiled it. Insulted it.

He defied Father.

He insulted Father.

He trampled on Father's kindness.

He held Father in contempt.

He denied my world.

He broke my world—my father.

And so, and so, and so, I have to hurry and repair that world.

Father said I didn't need to make any moves, but…

…even if they aren't necessary, some things have to be done.

I think that's now. I think this is something I have to choose to do.

I'll take back my world, and I won't stop there.

I'll make him suffer in a bottomless pit of regret.

I'll kill everyone he loves with my own hands.

I'll make sure he hears every last bit of their screams clear as crystal.

Firo Prochainezo.

I'll never, ever forgive him.

Never ever, ever.

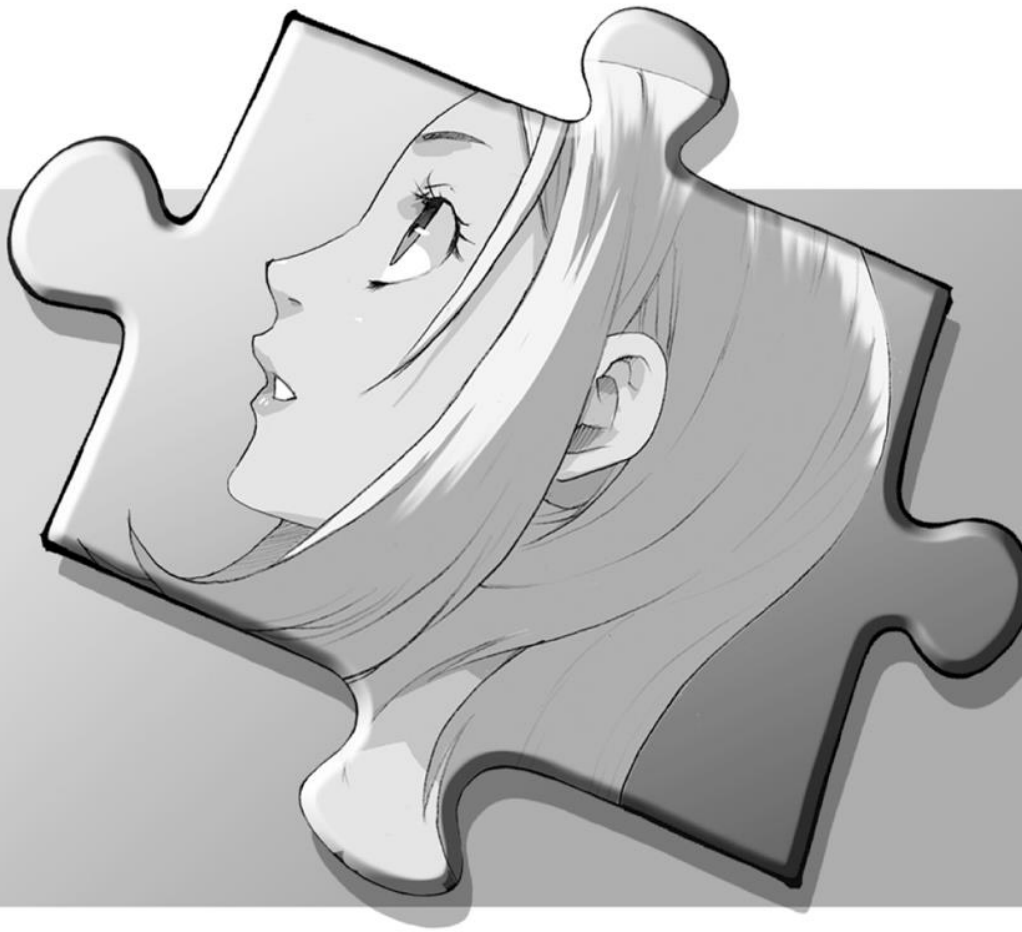
Never ever, ever—

And when I'm done with him, he'll be crying like a baby.



CHAPTER 5

PETER PAN AND ALICE LEAD EACH OTHER ASTRAY



CHAPTER 5: PETER PAN AND ALICE LEAD EACH OTHER ASTRAY

Friday After midnight Chicago An abandoned factory

Chicago, long after sundown.

Inside a factory bathed in the light of fires kindled in oil drums, Nice's cheerful voice echoed.

"So then, unsurprisingly, I was sure I was a goner, but the spark made it down the fuse just in time—"

"…"

"Oh, yes, and there was the time Jacuzzi was afraid the corpses of some mafia men might start moving, so I blew the bodies up for him with one of my bombs. Man, you should have seen his face—"

Rail was as silent as ever, but Nice kept relating anecdotes of past explosions to him with immense pleasure.

As he listened to all her absolutely insane-sounding tales of explosions, Rail kept thinking.

I have to blow it up.

But what is "it"?

Something like an obsession churned in his mind, over and over: *You have to blow it up*. But he didn't know what his target was supposed to be.

If he had a goal, it was rescuing Frank. However, he also understood that his goal and this impulse lay in completely different directions.

Blow it up, blow it up, blow it up, blow it up, blow it up, blow it up, blow it up, blow it up, blow it away, blow it away, blow it away, blow it away, blow it away, burn it, burn it, burn it, break it, break it, break it, smash it up, smash everything up, smash it, smash it, smash, smash,

smash, argh it's such a mess I feel gross, this is gross, blow it away, blow it away, blow it away, blow it up, blow it up, blow it up…

However, at the same time, something in the boy's mind held him back as well.

No, I can't, I can't, I can't, if I give in to that impulse here, I'll be doing just what Huey wants, I'm not a bomb launcher, I love explosives, but I'm definitely not his tool, I won't blow things up the way he wants me to, I've got my own goals…

As his thoughts ran on a loop, Rail peeked at Nice's face out of the corner of his eye.

So this…is the legendary bomb fiend.

At first, he really hadn't been able to believe it, but the knowledge she displayed regarding explosives and bombs was enough to overwhelm even Rail…

And most convincing of all, everything she said exuded something like affection for bombs. Sometimes she'd stop talking, as if she was reliving the instant of an explosion, and an enraptured expression would appear on her face. He didn't sense anything false in it, but he did sense something abnormal. Rail was growing convinced that this girl was another type of bomb fiend from himself.

It's too late, though.

If I'd met her the day before yesterday, at least…I might have been incredibly, terrifically happy.

I might have hit it off really well with this lady and the rest of her group.

We could have had a great time talking about bombs.

We might have been friends.

But now…I can't feel anything.

After all, she's human.

She’s not like me.

…No.

I’m the one who’s different.

What am I anyway? I’m not human. I’m not immortal.

And without bombs, I can’t do anything. I’m not even strong, like Frank…

I can’t flip the idea around and own it, the way Christopher does.

I want to go crazy, but I can’t manage it completely.

But I think, right now…I’m not okay, either.

The impulse to destroy washed relentlessly over Rail’s mind. Somewhere along the way, it became a headache, and it gnawed away at his heart, deeply and quietly.

The only ones he could see around him now were the lady bomb fiend, who’d introduced herself as Nice, the woman in the red dress, whose name was Miria, and a few thuggish-looking guys.

Up until a moment ago, there had been a lot more people, but somebody had come and called them, saying something about not having enough hands and needing help, and then they’d all swarmed out and gone off somewhere.

Now that Rail had his bombs, he could have blown up everyone remaining and gone on his way. However, it felt like he wouldn’t have to do that. If he said he was going, it seemed likely that they’d just let him go.

“Oh, right. Right now…if anything’s troubling you, please tell me about it. I can’t leave a fellow bomber out in the cold,” Nice suddenly offered.

Rail turned away, snubbing the offer. “…It’s none of your business.”

“Our leader likes to stick his nose in other people’s business, and I’m afraid I’ve caught it from him.”

There was a soft smile on Nice’s scarred face. Rail glanced at her, and the destructive impulse echoing in his heart grew stronger.

She and the others had been kind to him, even though they didn’t know him from Adam. Before, he might have opened his heart to them.

But right now, Rail didn’t have a scrap of the mental security that would have required.

Amid the repeated exhortations to “blow it up” in his heart, a remark unexpectedly surfaced.

“I just hope…somebody who’s still whole can pull you back from the edge.”

“You see, if that happens, I’m sure you’ll be able to live as a human*, Rail.”*

Remembering what Christopher had said, Rail quietly shook his head.

That’s impossible. It’s just not possible, Christopher.

Although Nice’s obsession didn’t exactly make her normal, she and Miria probably counted as “still whole.” He understood that.

But, but Christopher… They can’t reach me.

Nothing anyone who isn’t broken says can get through to me anymore.

And so, and so I…can’t…

I can’t do anything except blow things up anymore, Chris.

When I break completely, then…then…

Will you…take my hand again?

Please, Chris…

Please…

Rail didn't even say his wish out loud. It just disappeared inside him, in vain.

And then—reality struck an additional blow.

"Eeeek?!"

Suddenly, Miria's scream echoed in the factory.

…?

Several of the people who'd stayed behind looked her way, wondering what was up, and—

"Good evening."

—they saw two men in suits, one on each side of Miria, holding her arms.

"…! What are you doing?! Let me go! No…! Let! Me! Gooo!"

Miria struggled and kicked, but the handgun-toting men didn't even flinch as they scanned the warehouse.

"Whoa there, nobody move. We heard there were more of you, but everyone here now had better stay right where they are."

Are they with the guys who kidnapped Sham?!

They weren't wearing black, but seeing someone abruptly caught and restrained made Rail remember the events of that afternoon, and cold sweat broke out on his back.

"That's it—stay right where you were."

Flashing their guns, the men looked around impassively.

Then their eyes went to Rail and Nice.

"There's somebody covered in scars."

"Hmm…? But there are two of 'em. Which one?"

Although their scars were of a completely different type, both of them had a significant amount.

The men held a whispered discussion about something, then pointed a gun at Miria's head and spoke slowly to Nice and the rest.

"Either way, we need one person besides the bomber to answer our questions. Both of you, come with us."

"Who are you…?"

"We'll take your questions afterward. Right now, I'm gonna have to ask you to think about this young lady's life and follow orders."

His speech was cool and even and not even particularly threatening, but that was exactly what planted the fear that he could shoot Miria without blinking.

"Never mind, just run! I'll… I'll be fine, so…!" Miria shouted.

But Nice gave up on resisting and slowly raised both hands.

Meanwhile, as Rail watched the scene play out, he was already reaching into his pouch.

I see… They've got a hostage, huh?

I wonder which of us they're after, me or Miss Nice.

It's probably me, but…

Still. Too bad.

I can blow you up, you know.

You and everyone here.

As he took out a bomb, he actually looked somewhat happy, as if he'd finally found a legitimate reason to satisfy his impulse to destroy things.

Just then—a sharp pang ran through Rail's neck.

"…—?"

Next there was a dull pain, as though something was being pressed into him.

It was a pain he'd felt far too often, long ago.

This is…

A sensation he'd felt countless times at the hands of Rhythm, the research institute Huey had developed personally, and at the hands of Huey himself.

It's the sting of an injection…uh…huh…nn…ah…

As he felt his own awareness rapidly falling away, Rail flinched…and then fell into a deep sleep.

When she saw *the third man*, who caught Rail's body from behind, Nice bit her lip. "When did he…?!"

Slowly pulling Rail into his arms, the third man returned the syringe to his jacket. "They said to be particularly careful of suicide moves. Well, he might not have liked that shot, but I hope you don't hold it against me."

Then the man took some sort of jar out of his jacket and gave an expressionless order.

"Take that woman away first."

The men nodded, then covered the struggling Miria's mouth and started out of the factory. "Stop! Let me go! Help me… Help me, Isaac…! Mmph…"

Nice looked at Miria, whose voice had been muffled, then glared at the man holding Rail.

"…?! She's nothing to do with this! I won't fight you, so please, let her go!"

“If we just held a gun on you, you might blow yourself up on the way over, and then we’d be up a river… Hey, don’t worry. Once we’re done, we’ll let you go right away,” the man muttered callously.

He took a white object out of the jar and tossed it into his mouth.

It was a small sugar cube.



Inside Nebula headquarters

“Hmm…?”

Gustav had been examining a work of art on display in the guest room corridor as he turned toward an imposing group stepping out of the elevator.

At first glance, they appeared to be a group of lawyers or something along those lines.

They were dressed very well, but the eyes under their hats were filled with something dark and tense. In other words, this was not a group of honest citizens.

Spotting an individual in the center of that group, Gustav narrowed his already-sharp eyes even further and muttered quietly to himself.

“I know him… Why is he here?”

As he watched them recede down the far side of the corridor, the vice president of the information brokerage thought for a while. Then, intending to contact his headquarters, he made for his guest room, which was equipped with a telephone.

As a result, he missed something important.

Just after the door of his room closed…

…Rubik, who was crunching a sugar cube, and the rest of his group appeared from an emergency stairwell farther down the corridor.

A child the vice president had met just the other day was slung over his shoulder.

A child whose body was crisscrossed with suture scars.



Inside Dolce

“This is fun… Let me tell you a fun story.”

As he dexterously repapered the wall with his wrench, Graham murmured calmly to himself.

“Y’know that carefree couple always hangin’ out with Jacuzzi’s group? From what I hear, one of ’em, Isaac or somebody, just got out of the pen. He’ll be here tomorrow morning…and they say they came all the way here to meet him. It’s a truly beautiful gesture of love. Those two were torn apart by the law, but their bond survived the unbearable loneliness unbroken. It’s unbreakable, huh…? Wonderful, really wonderful! And since it doesn’t have a physical shape, I can’t even break it with my wrench! Yes! It’s just too perfect! Should such a thing be allowed to exist?! Sure, why not?! I’ll okay it! I believe in human love! I fully intend to dislocate the joints of those who doubt it with my wrench, *capisce*?!”

“Then you should start by havin’ some love and kindness for your fellow man, Mr. Graham… Sheesh.”

Even as Shaft grumbled at Graham, who was as energetic as ever, he was helping to repair the bar’s interior.

Meanwhile, Jacuzzi and the other delinquents were bustling around the bar, hard at work.

Several more members of their group had been called in later and press-ganged into helping fix the place up, a fact that led to some grousing as they helped Jacuzzi carry tables.

“Why us too…?”

“There’s no other way. We have to finish up here as fast as possible and take Graham back to New York!”

Even as he said there was no other way, Jacuzzi was taking a fairly active role in the repairs.

They’d already been at work for about half a day, but there was no irritation in his eyes. He’d probably heard about the bar’s circumstances and felt sorry for the trouble the proprietors had to go through—and on the place’s thirtieth anniversary, no less.

“Come to think of it, you said that boy woke up?”

“Yeah, right before we got called over here. He was clammed up tight, but Nice and Miria are both staying with him. They’re treatin’ him nice, so he should open up soon.”

“Huh.” Jacuzzi’s response was unusually brusque, and his friends grinned at him.

“Hey, don’t tell me you’re actually jealous of that brat.”

“Wha—?! N-no, I’m not!”

He had apparently hit the nail on the head, because Jacuzzi was bright red when he denied it.

“‘Don’t you take my Nice!’ he’s thinkin’.” “That’s you all over, Jacuzzi.”

“Whoo, it’s getting hot.” “Burning man.” “Well, now all we have to do is meet Isaac tomorrow and then just head back together, right?” “Hya-haah!”

His friends were as cheerful and hyper as ever. However, Jacuzzi looked at the people who were working on the other side of the bar, near the counter, and his face clouded just a little.

Red eyes and rows of sharp fangs, like a shark’s.

Christopher Shaldred, a member of Lamia, the group that had once come very close to killing him.

As he recalled the incident the previous year, Jacuzzi remembered what Tim had said to him just before he came here. Come to think of it, Tim had mentioned that Graham was fighting with his companions.

That was exactly why he'd panicked and come here, wasn't it? After all the confusion, he'd forgotten about it, and the fact struck him as so pathetic that his eyes teared up.

Jacuzzi sighed deeply as he thought, then glanced over at Christopher again— But the suspicious individual in question was apparently enjoying a riveting conversation with the blond boy… Although the boy looked sullen, and the man was the only one smiling.

I wonder what it is. He seems to have mellowed out a lot since the last time I saw him.

Still, what's scary is scary.

Jacuzzi averted his face, as if he couldn't afford to make eye contact, and concentrated on his own work.

Well, I'm not sure what's going on, but he seems to have stopped fighting with Graham, and I bet Tim will get everything else squared away later.

Relaxing into the assurance that it would be taken care of by everyone else, Jacuzzi and his group threw themselves into repairing damage they'd done nothing to cause.

They had no idea what was happening to the ones they'd left behind at the abandoned factory…

"That's right. They've fixed the telephone already, but… These people said they didn't know anything about the line."

“It was just your imagination. They listened when I talked things over with them, didn’t they? They’re even repairing the bar for us. What reason could they have had for cutting the telephone line?”

“…I suppose…”

“I bet there was some sort of trouble at the phone company. It’s fixed now, so everything’s all right.”

As he listened to the elderly couple’s conversation, the Poet was as silent as ever.

So the telephone was dead… Was it really an accident?

Did someone intentionally create these circumstances? Were they trying to engineer a situation that would bring together most of the relevant parties? Perhaps they believed the police might damage their chances?

In that case, who cut, then repaired, the phone line? And when?

I can’t imagine someone here slipped out… Did they have an outside accomplice?

“What’s the matter, Poet? It’s creepy when you clam up.”

The Poet had been helping out with the cleaning in silence, and Sickle spoke to him quietly.

He briefly glanced at her, then began muttering in his usual way.

“Contradictions are the twittering of birds hailing from the distant horizons of space and time. Her speech defies the mathematical sequence God has ordained, this maiden with eyes the color of dead leaves. She has forgotten even the fate she has bestowed upon others, and from that selfsame throat erupts a new sequence, like to a declaration that she is the creator who brought the whole of the world into being!”

“…I know I’ve told you to shut up a ton of times before, but if you’re describing inconsistency like… No, actually, just shut up for a while.”

Fighting back the urge to kick him as she murmured, Sickle took control of the conversation.

“If what Chris said is true, then Frank got snatched by that group in lab coats. If Rail is trying to rescue him, he might end up a hostage instead…” She gritted her teeth in irritation, and anger smoldered in her eyes. “Dammit, we don’t have Sham or Hilton or Leeza. As things stand, we can’t even find out what’s going on. I’m losing my mind.”

Was her anger directed at the white-coat-clad group or at their own powerless selves? The Poet decided it was probably the latter, but he kept thinking anyway.

But what did they hope to accomplish by assembling us here? Did they plan to blow up the bar and get rid of all of us at a stroke?

No… If they did, they would likely have done so well before now. Then…considering what happened after we arrived…

A temporary resolution to our conflict?

…No, it couldn’t be that.

Apparently, although even he hadn’t realized it at the time, he’d been relieved that the three-way battle between Sickle, Chris, and the man in the coveralls had ended. The Poet smiled faintly, grateful to the boy who’d dashed liquor over them.

He did have a faint sense that something wasn’t quite right, but…in the end, the Poet didn’t identify what was causing it.

At least not until a few seconds later, when a new face burst into the bar.

“Jacuzzi! Jacuzzi, are you in here?!”

A young man dashed into the restaurant, shouting, and caught the attention of everyone inside.

He was one of the delinquents who’d stayed behind at the abandoned factory with Nice and the others, Jacuzzi realized. The

delinquent's intensity was making him nervous, but still he replied, "Wh-what's the matter?"

"We got trouble… We got some real trouble, dammit!"

The boy was out of breath, and his face was pale. Everyone could tell something was up, something was big, and tension again replaced the peace of the bar.

"It's Nice… Nice, and Miria, and that kid…"

"What happened?! Did they fight or something?!"

Miria was one thing, but if Nice and the bomber kid got into a fight, the whole town could get blown sky-high. Mentally erasing that image, Jacuzzi began to panic with tears building up.

But the situation was nothing like what he'd imagined.

"Those three… They… They got grabbed by a buncha weirdos in suits!"

Just then—

—something strange happened in the bar.

The delinquents gulped when they heard that their friends had been kidnapped, but…

…several individuals displayed a clearly unique type of astonishment, simultaneously muttering "Why?" and "They couldn't have."

They weren't asking why the kidnapping had occurred.

It sounded more like a perfect plan had abruptly fallen apart.

And it didn't escape the Poet's notice.

One was a friend of Graham, the man in the coveralls—a guy he'd called Shaft.

Another was a young friend of Jacuzzi's, apparently the one who'd brought them here.

And one more…

The change was most conspicuous in that individual.

After all, he'd remained persistently sullen up until a moment ago, more so even than Sickle, no matter what happened. However, for this one instant, confusion made itself plain in his face.

It was the person who'd brought Christopher to this bar.

Ricardo Russo, the boy who'd introduced himself as Placido's grandkid.



In a train on the transcontinental railroad

"Why…?"

On a late-night express bound for Chicago, in the seat opposite Isaac, Sham blurted out the word, his eyes widening.

"Hmm? What's up, Sham?"

"N-no, it's nothing."

"Really? Okay, never mind, then."

Isaac was too excited about tomorrow to sleep, so he'd been gazing out the window at the scenery. When he caught sight of shadows flying past in the moonlight, he began bouncing around like a little kid.

"Hey, Sham, look at that. There are so many birds flying out there, even at night!"

"…They say that swifts can fly even while they're asleep, so…"

"Really?! Talk about hard workers; that's amazing!"

As Sham joined Isaac in watching the flock of birds, which were flying even faster than the train, he thought for a while.

Why…?

I know nothing about this.

Miria, Nice, and Rail, kidnapped…?

That wasn't part of my plan.

Right now, at this very moment, as he felt the fear of this unknown element stealing through his network, a light sweat broke out on the back of every Sham in the United States.



Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary In the cells

"So Chané's the……"

"What's the matter?"

Firo hadn't managed to ask about that woman Chané before, so he'd been about to get the details. But while he was talking with Dragon in the next cell over, the Asian man had suddenly fallen silent. Worried, Firo had called out to him, but—

"N-no, it's nothin'… Sorry. I'm turning in for the night."

"…? Did something happen *somewhere else*?"

"…Don't worry about it. Once this is over, I won't lay a finger on your friends. I promise."

"You'd better not. That doesn't mean we're all square, though. Remember that," Firo warned in a low voice.

But Dragon's only response was silence.



Chicago Nebula headquarters basement Pharmaceutical sector Development Department Six

"…"

“What’s wrong?”

One of the researchers had abruptly frozen, and Renee spoke to him, sounding concerned.

“N-nothing. It was just a little dizzy spell.”

“Oh, honestly. Did you pull an all-nighter? Poor circulation can even make incomplete immortals feel temporarily unwell, so be careful, all right?”

Renee was chattering away in the sort of tone she would have used for a lecture. The researcher responded with a wry smile, the way he always did.

Sham, *who was disguised as a researcher*, was keeping his cool and acting like his usual self, so as not to be unmasked.

Renee was ditzy, but perceptive. She and Huey both posed similar dangers.

Regretting the disturbance in so many of his bodies, Sham promptly decided to gather information to use in revising his plan— And he started by moving an individual who was very close to this one.

“By the way, Renee,” said a man seated in a chair in the corner of the room. He had no distinguishing features to speak of. He seemed to be a simple staff member, but—

“What is it, Sham?”

—Renee called the man Sham without blinking.

What I have to be careful of here is to avoid accidentally responding with the researcher.

Mentally bracing himself, Sham grinned in the body of the staff member. “Did my information prove useful?”

“Yes! Very much so! *Thanks to your betrayal of Huey*, we acquired a valuable specimen in Frank, and we’ve managed to secure all the Hiltons in town!”

“I can’t afford to let Huey find out yet, so I’ve reported that I was taken as well…”

As he chuckled with a spiteful smile, Sham thought to himself.

Using each one of his hundreds and thousands of bodies, the mind that lay below all of them again started making sense of what he knew about the present situation.



Sham and Hilton.

They were both by-products of alchemy, enormous masses of consciousness that had been created by the art.

Both had expanded their mental networks, Sham taking male bodies and Hilton taking over females.

And in order to implement his plan, Sham had begun by betraying Huey.

Hilton’s bodies were strictly managed by Huey and Rhythm. She didn’t have the liquid that was required in order to propagate her awareness in the first place.

This had been true for Sham as well. However, he had capitalized on a vulnerability, gotten a member of Rhythm to drink his water, and succeeded in taking over his mind.

The rest had been easy.

He’d cultivated the water and taken over mind after mind behind Huey’s back until he’d manage to acquire five times more than Huey knew he had.

Next, he'd sent one of his unofficial bodies to Renee.

He'd already had control of one of her researchers, but neither Huey nor Renee knew about that one. The researchers of Rhythm had originally suggested infiltrating Renee's group, but Huey had objected, saying it could be used against them.

But Sham had already broken one rule, and there was no need for him to listen to Huey's suggestions.

He simply kept multiplying his bodies as he saw fit.

Then, as the traitor Sham, he'd leaked all kinds of information to Renee: notes on Lamia, on Huey's other pet organizations, and on Sham's and Hilton's official bodies.

Renee and the Nebula research team probably hadn't believed him completely, but even with their doubts, they'd made use of it.

As a result, right before Huey's experiment was slated to begin, the wanted poster for Lamia began to circulate, and Hilton/Leeza temporarily disappeared from the city.

Sham had staged his own kidnapping in front of Rail to create the impression that he was being taken just like Hilton, but even he hadn't expected Rail's insanity to have progressed as far as it had.

Still, he had to keep his own plan moving forward.

And to that end, he had spent today feigning coincidences, making contact with Isaac, and feeling a level of satisfaction and determination toward what he'd done. He'd thought he was successfully riding the stone that had begun to roll, but—

Why were Rail, Nice, and Miria kidnapped now *of all times?*

He'd been sure he had a handle on everything.

Conceit had led him to make an error. He should have left one of his bodies at that abandoned factory.

However, he only had one body on Jacuzzi's team, and he'd needed to use it to get Jacuzzi and his crew to Dolce, where Graham was waiting. In light of that, he hadn't even considered the option of staying at the factory himself.

Dammit. I should have at least kept watch.

Even as his mind cursed in irritation, the thousands of bodies that acted as his hands and feet kept coming up with emotions and choices that corresponded to their separate circumstances.

Compared to normal humans, he could probably be called truly omnipotent.

However, the closer he got to omnipotence, conversely, the more afraid he sometimes was.

He could take every possible precaution, and unforeseen situations could still crop up. He didn't know whether it would be the fault of fate or human hands.

Even if he united all of humanity in himself, that probably wouldn't change.

Plus, a world composed entirely of himself would be boring. He wanted no part of that, so Sham was doing his best to avoid multiplying his bodies further.

…For now, at any rate.

Sham began sifting through all his bodies, hunting for any information connected to his current predicament.

All at once, his thousands of bodies all searched for the cause. To borrow the terminology of a later era, it was like searching an information network for a single word or image.

…

And then he found it.

It wasn't conclusive, but it could serve as a hint.

It can't be…

Don't tell me someone like that *is getting involved.*

It was only a possibility at this point in time, but there was no real way for him to check.

That individual was in a difficult place to infiltrate, like the upper echelons of Nebula or the United States Congress. Even if he managed to make him drink the water and took over his mind, that body would be eliminated as soon as the people around him sensed anything amiss. Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary was one such place; merely sneaking several individuals into it as he was currently doing was no small feat, and they were reassigned every few months at the longest.

He could take over the mind of the President of the United States, but he had the feeling that some sharp intellect would see through it right away and he would soon be relieved of his office. The feeling was something like instinct, acquired by accumulating the experience and knowledge of several thousand people—but it was probably correct.

This was true when dealing with Huey as well.

Ordinarily, outwitting Huey was inconceivable, which was why he was having to scheme and plot and stoop to every low-down trick he had, all without breaking a sweat.

If everything came tumbling down because of a temporary obstacle like this one, there was no hope for him.

Burying his restlessness under the chaos of several thousand different emotions, he calmed his mind again.

He understood that the only thing he could do now was stay true to his own convictions.



Inside Dolce

Jacuzzi's group had scrambled out of the bar in a panic, and it felt rather empty now.

The repairs were very nearly finished, and the only people still there were the ones who'd been involved in that initial three-way battle. Graham had left his friends with an unusually brief "It's all on you now, men!" and gone with Jacuzzi and company. Shaft and the others, bewildered, had continued working on the bar.

At this point, it was less like a repair job than a remodel. Although they'd preserved the bar's atmosphere, the timeworn interior now seemed practically new.

At first, the old couple who owned the bar had thought this might end up being the worst day of their lives, but once it was over, the day would remain in their memories as one of the better ones.

And the awful first half had probably made the events of its second half shine brighter.

"All right, everyone, excellent work, and I'm sure you're tired. These are terribly late, but please enjoy!"

Smiling cheerfully, the old proprietor brought out a platter heaped with barbecued ribs, seasoned according to their various styles.

The assortment of spicy scents mingled with the aroma of the meat juices, whetting the appetites of the tired workers.

There was no telling who went first as they began reaching for the platter. Christopher raised a rib with the seasonings he'd ordered to his lips. The moment his sharp fangs sank into the meat, the juices within spilled into the spicy, highly seasoned sauce.

"Wow… This is really good."

Making an unusually straightforward comment, Christopher savored his food in silence for a little while.

“Yum.”

“Whoa.”

Shaft and the rest of Graham’s buddies also took ribs from the table and piled them onto their plates, expressing their appreciation.

Ricardo gazed at them wordlessly for a while, but…

…noticing that the man in the hat was looking her way, she reached for the meat as well, as if to camouflage her own silence.

“By the way, what are you going to do now?” After polishing off his first rib, Christopher spoke to Sickle, who was taking her time.

Pausing her knife and fork, Sickle answered quietly. “Well, since we can’t count on instructions from Sham, Hilton, or Leeza, I’m thinking of doing an independent search for Frank to start with. After all, Rail will probably turn up wherever he is, too… What about you?”

“Mm, that’s yet to be seen. From what I hear, Chi went to New York and probably won’t be back for a while yet, and if Sham and company aren’t delivering orders, my friend-and-master would be Ricardo. ☺ Oh? He may outrank Huey, in fact, since he’s a friend, too.”

“You are such a… Ah, shit, I shouldn’t be surprised to hear that from you, but would you worry about Rail and Frank a little? From what you told us earlier, if you’d brought Rail with you—tied him up and dragged him if you had to—this wouldn’t have happened.”

In response to this clear complaint, Christopher shook his head softly. “…A year ago, I might have done just that.”

“?” Sickle’s eyebrows came together, but Christopher didn’t elaborate.

Perhaps deciding that saying more would be pointless, Sickle glanced at Ricardo next.

Immediately realizing what the look meant, Ricardo considered for a little while, then gave her own honest thoughts. “For now…I’d like to get a handle on the situation myself. Would it be all right if we met somewhere tomorrow and picked this up again then?”

Sickle and the Poet had no objections to that suggestion, which made it painfully clear just how few options they had.

During the awkward silence that followed, the only sound in the bar was the noise of Shaft and the rest of Graham’s underlings devouring the ribs with relish.

They ate as though these ribs were the most heavenly, exquisite, delicious meal they could have…

After they’d traded contact methods and settled on a meeting spot, Ricardo and Christopher left the bar.

The owner’s profusion of gratitude made them feel more apologetic than anything as they got into the car and set off for their planned lodgings for that night.

“…Your family’s full of really sensible people, Chris.”

“You think so? Well, I don’t really know what was going on, but the Poet was pretty quiet today. You also haven’t seen Chi’s fabulously oriental outfits yet; that’s why you can afford to say that.”

“Either way, I don’t think they’re any stranger than you.”

“Hmm? Was that supposed to wound me?” Christopher cackled, gripping the steering wheel. The mood between them in the car was no different than it always was.

Amid that familiarity, in the same casual tone he always used, Christopher asked a question.

“By the way, Ricardo, can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Which one are you?”

“?”

It was a peculiar thing to ask out of the blue, and Ricardo frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, you see…”

Stepping lightly on the accelerator, red eyes blazing, her friend asked a critical question—and in that instant, a line of sweat ran down Ricardo’s face.

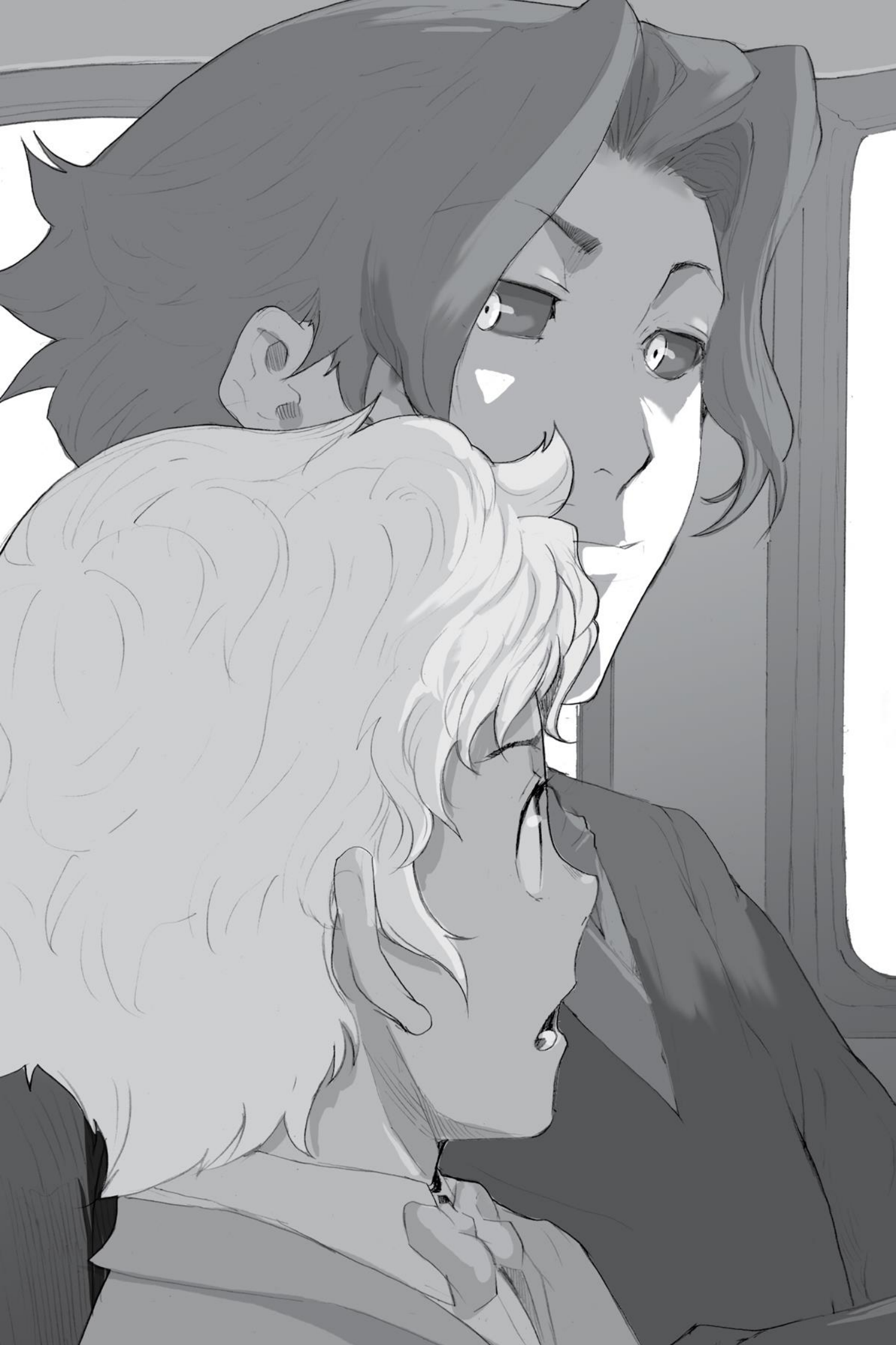
“I was just wondering if you were Sham or Hilton.”

“…—”

For a little while, Ricardo was silent.

Only the sound of the engine echoed around them, and the stillness around them seemed wrong somehow.

Just when it seemed as if the engine’s hum might continue around them forever…Ricardo’s expression returned to normal.



“What are you talking about?” she asked. “Sham and Hilton are the messengers you mentioned in your conversation earlier, aren’t they?”

“Hmm…?”

She was clearly trying to throw him off. After hesitating a little over her denial, Christopher stood by his own assumption. He was still smiling.

“No, really, no need to hide it or anything. I’m not angry, and even if you are Sham or Hilton, it doesn’t change the fact that you’re my friend.”

“…What makes you so sure?”

“Several reasons, but…let’s see. The first time I smelled something funny was…when we found Rail.” As he remembered the events a few days before, Christopher’s smile faded, and his tone grew more detached. “You see, I’m very confident in my hearing, and yet you said you’d heard the sound of an explosion I’d completely failed to notice. The first time was one thing, but my ears were pricked that second time, and you still heard it. Here in the city, with so many buildings to scatter the sound, you correctly guessed the direction and even the distance.”

“…”

“Then there was the time you came to save me, driving the car. This car’s not easy to handle; you couldn’t operate it as smoothly as you did just by knowing how to work the gas and brake.”

“…”

Christopher went on to list several more things that had struck him as odd, and Ricardo listened in silence from start to finish.

“Although I think the most glaring one was today.”

"…I thought it might be." Her brief murmur seemed resigned, apparently affirming what Christopher had said.

"Well, sure. Almost nothing's ever that convenient. Chicago's huge, and it's just not possible for all of us to show up at the same old bar all at once. More than anything, while I was fighting with Graham and Sickle, nobody opened the main door. The blinds were down over the windows, too."

"But Jacuzzi Splot and his group knew about it."

"…And while I'm listing things…"

"I know Jacuzzi Splot's name, although I've never heard it before," Ricardo answered as if she had read ahead in the script, and Christopher burst out laughing.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes, exactly!"

He broke into a broad, fanged grin, and with that eerie expression on his face, he pushed down on the accelerator even more.

As the car sped up, Christopher's smile faded. Continuing in a calmer tone, he spoke to *the something that wore Ricardo's shape*.

"Here's what strikes me as strange: if you're Sham or Hilton, you should already have given me instructions from Huey. At the very least, you should have relayed them to Sickle and the Poet back there."

Christopher's expression turned rather serious, and he went on.

"You wouldn't happen to be…"

"…"

"…betraying Huey, would you?"

Silence descended again, and the noise of the engine was the dominant sound in the car's cramped interior.

Ricardo had already reverted to her usual sullen expression, and she responded to her friend with a question that sounded very much in character.

“If I am, will you kill me?”

If she’d been unlucky, that remark could have gotten her shot through the head on the spot.

But Christopher shook his head, smiling wryly.

“A year ago, I would have… Ah yes, Chi asked me the same thing once, and I told him, “Sure I’d kill you; why?” No hesitation. Oh, the nostalgia. Me in my salad days.”

That was all he said, and then his usual faint smile was back on his face.

Ricardo lowered her eyes quietly, then spoke with more gravity than usual. “…Tomorrow, once things calm down, I’ll tell you everything.”

Conversely, she’d just declared that she wasn’t going to tell him now, but a firm resolve lay behind her words.

“And so, until then…*trust me*.”

“Sure, that’s fine.”

In response to a terribly convenient request, Christopher smiled innocently with his monstrous face.

Wearing a smile so pure it was fiendish in its own way, the childish monster…murmured bashfully.

“After all, you’re my friend, Ricardo… Or so I’d like to say, but you know what they say about people who are too quick to befriend others.”

“…”

“So I’m not just saying this offhand.”

“Huh?”

“No matter what you really are—you’re the friend who supported me *here*, as I am now, you know? So even if you sell me out, I’ll forgive you with a smile… Remember what I said? It’s okay for friendships to be give-and-take.”

“If you need peace of mind…go ahead and take whatever you need from me.”



Dawn broke.

First in Chicago.

A few hours later, the dawn light fell over Alcatraz.

That blazing red light tinted both locations beautifully, declaring the arrival of an ordinary morning.

And—*they* welcomed a morning that would prove to be a crossroads.

For some of the people who had been involved in that incident, the morning would be an ending.

For others, it would light a new path, and serve as a major turning point…



Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary

During the exercise period after breakfast, Firo wandered around the recreation yard.

Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary had a relatively spacious yard, a perfect place for the prisoners to let off steam after spending most of their time cooped up.

Twice a week, on just two days—Saturday and Sunday—they were allowed to use the recreation yard for a mere five hours per day.

During this free time, which somehow managed to feel both long and short, many of them entertained themselves by playing handball.

Some played games with dominos or cards, while others sat on the steps that formed one side of the recreation yard, soaking up the sun and fresh air.

It appeared to be the picture of peace, but stern-faced guards armed with rifles looked down over the yard from the guard station windows, forcibly reminding them just where they were.

It was the first time Firo had walked freely around the recreation yard this way.

He'd been out there on cleaning duty several times, but he'd been focused on work then, or Dragon had been biting chunks out of the gap-toothed guy, so he hadn't had time to really take in the fresh air.

Now he was enjoying his first real taste of free time, which was good—except there was nothing he really wanted to do, and he kept thinking about Huey Laforet, who was probably deep underground at this very moment.

It's been two days since then, but…he hasn't tried to pull anything.

Firo had thought he would attempt to make contact with him or, worst-case, come into his cell personally and put his right hand on his head— But all his anxiety had been for nothing.

Did Isaac get out okay?

Thinking of his friend, who'd vanished from the prison, Firo looked up at the sky from among the prisoners who were enjoying their free time. Casually, his eyes went to the water tower that stood at the back of the recreation yard, on the other side of a fence.

Wow. Peregrine falcons all the way out here, huh?

Spotting countless birds wheeling above the water tower, he slowly walked over that way.

From their size…I'd guess they're all females.

As he gazed at the graceful flock of falcons, Firo realized that his knowledge of birds had originally belonged to someone else. It gave him mixed feelings.

…Well, I guess it's not the end of the world if it's something like this. Thanks; I'll be sure to put it to good use.

With a mental expression of gratitude to the knowledge's rightful owner—an alchemist who'd been eaten by Szilard—Firo went closer. There weren't many inmates over here, and the sea breeze felt colder.

However, even when Firo approached them, the wheeling falcons didn't fly away. They were sticking to the water tower as if they owned it.

Man, that's a lotta birds.

Thinking there might be nests or something up on the tower, Firo decided to watch them for a little while, but then—

—impossible words reached his ears.

"…Found you."

Huh?

The words had come from somewhere nearby, and Firo looked around in spite of himself.

The speaker had clearly been a woman. She had a sultry, voluptuous voice, one that sounded more mature than Ennis's or Miria's.

Had he started hearing things in prison? Or was one of the guards listening to a radio on the other side of the fence?

If he was going to be hearing things, he'd rather hear Ennis, Firo thought—and the voice came a second time, more clearly than before.

"Perfect… You came outside."

"…—! Who's there?" Realizing that the words were definitely directed at him, Firo looked around again. But he didn't even see any inmates nearby, let alone a woman.

Suddenly—he was struck by a very unpleasant feeling.

Isn't it kinda dark…?

It was like the morning sun had been suddenly blotted out. Firo jerked his head up, looking at the sky…

…and saw something weird.

A moment ago, there had been about a dozen falcons.

Now there were at least a hundred, and they weren't over the water tower. They were circling over him.

———*?!*

For a moment, Firo was taken aback by the clearly abnormal numbers and behavior of the birds.

But the sultry, feminine voice still echoed relentlessly in his ears. "How dare you… Master Huey's… Father's eye— How dare you?!"

"What?"

As Firo heard the raw enmity in those words, he realized what was speaking.

It can't be… It's the falcons…?!

The moment the realization hit him…

One of the raptors plunged into a dive—

—and ruthlessly sank its sharp talons into his face.



Chicago Union Station

“Miria…!”

Murmuring the name of his sweetheart, a figure descended jauntily into the station.

His voice was drowned out by the station crowds, but Isaac was not bothered. His head was swiveling and his eyes were darting around with dizzying speed. “Where is she?”

After a long train journey, Isaac had finally arrived in Chicago.

They’d set a vague meeting time: this morning. Maybe Miria wasn’t there yet?

As Isaac scanned the area, fidgeting restlessly, other passengers bustled around him on their way into and out of the train.

“Come to think of it, I wonder where Sham went.” He hadn’t seen his friend since the train pulled into the station, and that was when Isaac realized he didn’t know the first thing about him. “I should have at least gotten his address in New York or something. Well, that’s all right; I’ll ask him next time I see him!”

Isaac believed, without a doubt, that they’d run into each other again in vast New York City.

Although he was alone now, he was still very much himself as he spun around and around, waiting for his beloved Miria to arrive.

Immediately afterward—he noticed someone standing behind him. Assuming it would be Miria, he turned around with a smile.

And there he saw—



Ten minutes later

Two figures dashed into the station, out of breath—Jacuzzi's friends, Nick and Jack.

Spotting a train that was preparing to depart for New York, Nick yelled in a panic.

"Aaah, the train's already in!"

"Hey, what are we even supposed to tell Isaac anyway? I mean, he's gonna lose it if we say somebody kidnapped Miria, right?"

"Nah, I don't think he'd do that, but…I betcha he'd start screamin' about goin' to save her, run off without a plan, and get himself hit by a car or something."

As they worried about this and that, the two of them scanned for Isaac, but they didn't see him on the platform.

"…? Is he on the next train?"

"Well, let's look a bit more."

They searched the platform until the next train arrived, but…

…Isaac never did turn up.

He wasn't on the next train, either. Or the one after that.



Turn back the clock a bit.

Nebula headquarters building The guest-room floor In a corridor

The decor in the hallway was so opulent that it could have been mistaken for a hotel or museum.

Along that hallway, some of the rooms that welcomed Nebula's diverse array of guests were luxury guest rooms that resembled

hotel suites. For the most part, they were intended for the directors of business partners and foreign politicians.

The door to one such room opened to reveal a group of men who appeared to be on the wrong side of the law, with one man at its very center.

Despite the clothes they wore, the men seemed very grim.

The members of the cleaning staff who were in the corridor gulped involuntarily, moving out of their path without being told.

The mere presence of this daunting group was enough to give them power over a room as they soundlessly made their way through Nebula, but…

Suddenly, their progress was blocked by a lone man and a petite girl holding a camera at the ready.

The man, who had appeared in front of this imposing wall with unbelievable boldness, glared at the men with sharp eyes.

Meanwhile, the girl was clutching her camera and shivering hard.

“Who’re you?”

“Wait, he’s…”

Muttering, the men stopped in their tracks.

As the tension built in the corridor, the man confronting them spoke to the group’s central figure, adjusting his monocle with a finger.

“…It’s been quite some time, hasn’t it?”

In response to the greeting, the man at the center of the human wall soundlessly raised his right hand.

Like a wave, the wall parted to the left and right and revealed a man in his prime.

He was probably past fifty. His wrinkles were not deep, but neither were they shallow, and a pair of intellectual-looking spectacles sat on his dignified face.

“It’s been a while, information broker Gustav. Soliciting subscriptions for your paper all the way out here?”

The words were ironic, but there was no sarcasm in his voice.

Gustav responded in his usual manner, with no marked change of expression. “I happened to catch sight of you on this floor yesterday, so I thought I would pay my respects.”

“Hmm. Let’s have you fill me in on the details over lunch. We’re about to go do a little negotiating, you see.”

“Very well, sir.”

With that, Gustav withdrew to the side of the corridor, letting the group in suits move on.

Carol, who was still shaking, hid in his shadow. Once she saw the men disappear around a corner, she exhaled deeply.

“Compose yourself… However, the restraint that kept you from screaming when you saw his face warrants an additional thirty points or so.” Gustav paid her a rare compliment.

Carol’s quivering lips parted. “Th-they weren’t just ordinary good people, were they? Were they?”

“Hmm?”

“U-um, who on earth was that man?”

Carol was still frightened. Gustav looked at her face, then put a hand to his chin.

“So you didn’t know, and the atmosphere was all that frightened you. That demands a deduction of five hundred and twenty-seven points.”

“I’m losing points?!”

Ignoring his assistant’s shriek, Gustav told her the name of the individual in question as casually as if he were introducing an old friend.

“You’d do well to familiarize yourself with him. That was Mr. Bartolo… The most influential figure in the Runorata Family, which is itself one of the most powerful groups in the East.”



A few minutes later Nebula headquarters In a certain meeting room

“…I believe I told you everything I can tell you yesterday.”

Nice was sitting in a chair—not that she had a choice—as she spoke resolutely to the men who were standing in front of her.

A thin sweat had broken out on her back, and it was all she could do to curb the fear that was welling up inside her.

She’d fought the Russo Family again and again.

She’d come face-to-face with death many times, most notably during the Flying Pussyfoot incident, and she had always survived.

And yet—right now, her mind was on the verge of being crushed by an extraordinary pressure.

These men… They’re probably mafia, but…

…they’re nothing like the Russos…!

They hadn’t done anything violent to her. She hadn’t been threatened.

Still, Nice could sense it with painful clarity. Maybe she had developed that sensitivity precisely because she’d led the Russo Family around by the nose and survived so many life-or-death situations.

She knew just how *incredibly, hopelessly vicious and dangerous* these men were.

Ronny Schiatto, the man she'd met a year ago, was still creepier, but as far as actual danger was concerned, the men in front of her seemed to pose several times more.

A middle-aged man sat in the center of the row of men, across the table from her. He wore glasses and looked rather sedate, but the sharpness of the eyes behind those spectacles was enough to keep her from making eye contact.

The middle-aged man, who'd introduced himself as Bartolo, spoke to her slowly in a voice that was as calm as his appearance.

"Yes. Today we want to talk, not to you, but to the boy next to you."

His eyes shifted to Rail, who was tied to a chair beside Nice.

Miria was currently isolated in another room. If Nice caused a disturbance with the bomb she had hidden on her person, she'd put Miria's life in danger. Unaware that the other woman was actually immortal, Nice gritted her teeth and kept trying to come up with a way to turn the tide.

Meanwhile, all Rail's bombs had been confiscated. He looked right back at the middle-aged man who was watching him, and an indescribable unease began creeping up on him.

What? What's with these guys?

They aren't immortals. They're just human, right?

And yet… Why? …Why are they so…?

*Why are they so…*terrifying*?*

They hadn't done anything specific to him, either, and yet he could feel a scorching heat working its way up from the depths of his throat.

It wasn’t just the elderly man. He stood at the center of a group scattered around him like the spokes of a wheel, and every one of them, especially the apparently identical twin youths who stood flanking the leader, gave Rail a weird, indescribable sense that something was wrong.

The threat came from their mere presence.

Where they stood.

How they moved.

Their eyes.

The way they breathed.

All these subtle actions tangled together in complex ways, exerting an overwhelming pressure on the two captives in their net.

There was just one exception—a whey-faced man with shaggy hair and whiskers—who did nothing but tremble in a corner of the room. He didn’t inspire any significant fear, although technically, he probably wasn’t supposed to be there. After all, his presence did nothing to soften the atmosphere.

Either way, Rail had no intention of giving them any answers, but the overwhelming weight of the air made breathing itself seem difficult.

I have to blow them up, blow them up, blow them up, blow them up, blow them up, blow them up, blow them up, blow them up, blow them up, blow them up, blow them up, blow them up, blow them up, blow them up, blow them up, I have to, I have to, aaaaaaaah, blow them up, blow them up, blow them up…

But… I can’t… I can’t.

The usual impulse reared its head inside him, but even that insanity was nearly suppressed by the reality in front of him. Plus, even if the impulse had won out over his fear, Rail didn’t currently have any explosives.

Then, the next instant…

…the pouch Rail had been wanting, the one that held his bombs, was set down on the table with a heavy *thump*.

"…!"

"What we'd like to ask you about…are these little *fireworks* you had."

Rail and Nice narrowed their eyes, each thinking something different. They knew what was in that pouch.

At the same time, they began to faintly suspect those explosives were at the center of some sort of connection.

Then, the bespectacled old man calmly confirmed exactly what they'd been imagining.

"Let me give it to you straight. These fireworks were originally supposed to go to a friend of mine. Unfortunately, while they were being shipped over, they were stolen."

Despite the oppressive mood, the old man was laying it on the line for them, maybe because he was dealing with kids.

However, the sweat on Nice's back was getting worse.

All she'd told them last night was that her group was in town to meet a friend who'd gotten out of prison, they'd happened to find the injured Rail, and they'd been taking care of him. She'd neglected to tell them that one of the reasons they hadn't turned him over to the police was the fact that they might have been the source of his bombs.

But if it were discovered that they were the thieves… The hardship and suffering that would befall them then would make the war with the Russo Family look like nothing. And the possibility that she'd live long enough to let Jacuzzi know about it was very close to zero.

As she imagined them gouging out her one good eye, stuffing a letter into the socket and delivering her corpse to Jacuzzi, she skipped right past trembling and went straight to nausea.

Ignoring Nice and her desperate attempts to hide her despair, the old man slowly got to his feet.

Gradually approaching Rail, he picked up where he'd left off, impassively.

"Well, the individual who wanted them the most has gone somewhere far away, so not having them didn't bother us that much. However, if it turns out the city of Chicago was destroyed using goods we ordered, the story will be very different indeed…no matter how they came into your possession." There was no pressure in his voice; he spoke to Rail as carefully as if he were reading him a picture book, letting the words themselves sink in. "For now, I'd like to make a deal with you. Fair and square. We'd like you to return all your remaining bombs to us. That's all. Including the ones you have tucked away for safekeeping somewhere."

"…!"

Apparently, they knew how many bombs there were in all.

He appeared to know both that the number of bombs used to blow up the Nebula facilities the other day was less than the full amount Rail had, and that the bombs currently sitting on the table wouldn't be nearly enough to make up the difference.

They couldn't possibly know how many he'd used in the past, so there were probably all sorts of ways for him to pull the wool over their eyes. Ordinarily, Rail would have been thinking of ways to trick them at this very moment.

Yet, as things stood, that lunatic impulse was eroding his very self, and the only thing rising in his heart was the base, instinctive fear that his bombs would be taken from him.

Could he settle this by simply switching back to his old explosives?

He'd be weaker than before; would he still be worth anything?

And worst of all—

Me, give in to a human?

To a plain old human, not even an immortal or a homunculus… An old guy like this?

We don't age, but he'll get old and die on his own even without our help. He's less complete than we are. Give in to him…?

No!

If I let that happen… If I let it…

Chris will get…even further…away!

He respected the red-eyed fiend. He'd been proud to be a homunculus like him, but—if he yielded to a measly human, had his bombs taken away, and reverted to being a mere powerless child…would Chris even look his way again?

He didn't think it out logically, but his complicated emotions arrived at that vague idea in an instant.

If the other option was to become an object of scorn even for *humans*…

If he couldn't even save Frank—

Then I'll die here.

If the world's that hopeless, I'll blow myself away.

It wasn't a resolution, and he hadn't gotten suicidally desperate.

It was simply that his drive to blow everything away had been fanned by the fear that surrounded him, then turned inward onto himself all at once.

“What do you say? I’m not asking you to do it for free, of course,” the old man asked gently, bringing his face closer to Rail’s.

Rail’s response was just one word.

“…No.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“Because I don’t want to fold…to lousy humans…like you.” He sounded slightly older than he looked.

The old man didn’t seem particularly flustered or angry. He wore a faint smile as he replied, “I see. You seem to have your own conviction, born of trauma. It’s a little flimsy, but considering your age, I’d say it more than qualifies as a conviction.”

He took another step toward Rail, closing the distance between their faces to about a foot and a half. Then, opening his own eyes just a little wider, he gazed into Rail’s large, doll-like eyes.

“Your current position frightens you.”

“…”

“You seem to grasp that your life is at risk if this goes badly, and yet you won’t so much as attempt to make a deal with us. You’re saying you’ll disregard death and choose your conviction instead. Is that right?”

Instead of answering, Rail spat at the old man’s face.

He’d already decided to die. He had the option of surviving, of paying back both humans and immortals and making Chris acknowledge him, of seeing his conviction through, but the resentful whispers inside him were blotting that option out.

The rude response actually made Rail feel better, but—

—the spit never reached the old man’s face.

A bodyguard type standing beside his employer whipped out a hand and caught it.

He closed his hand around the kid's saliva without even wiping it off his palm, and his face was…perfectly expressionless.

It was actually very creepy, and the old man's expression didn't even change, as if this was business as usual for him. An unspeakable chill clung to Nice and Rail.

"At my age, I don't have the energy to get angry about a little spit." Smiling and shaking his head, the old man slowly returned to his own seat. "Frankly, *I do know just a little* about what you really are."

"…!"

"?"

Rail and Nice each reacted differently. Rail glared, while Nice frowned in confusion as to what Rail would "really" be. She'd half concluded that what Rail really was was a bomb fiend like herself. As far as Nice was concerned, bombs were a relatively popular thing for kids to want—although her friends would probably have objected: "You think the world would survive with people like you all over the place?!" Naturally, this was true only in the world she lived in.

At any rate, now that he couldn't even make them kill him, Rail had begun to consider other options. In that case, should he bite off his own tongue and die? Or would it be better to risk it, slip out of his ropes, and reach for that bag? But…

Abruptly, the door opened, and a new man entered. His cackling and cheery tone struck a sharp contrast with the tension.

"Hey there, sorry about that, Barty! It's been a long time, huh! How's your grandkid, lil' Cazze? Doin' good?"

The voice was completely inappropriate, and the bodyguard types frowned in disapproval, while the old man he'd called Barty sighed, shaking his head.

However, without paying the slightest attention to these wordless protests, the man responsible for shattering the tension gave an easygoing reply.

"My meetin' ran late, see… Oh, hey. Is this the lil' bomber you were talkin' about? …Hmm? They're both all scarred up. Which of 'em is it? …Whoops, sorry; 'scuse me if the scars are a sensitive subject. Personally, I think they ain't a bad look. On either of ya."

He was probably a little older than the bespectacled man.

Despite their similar ages, this man was the complete opposite of the one he'd called Barty.

From his smile, he seemed more like a mischievous, yet somewhat sophisticated child than a good-natured guy. As he entered, Nice's mouth fell open, and Rail's tension relaxed for just a moment.

"Cal… Can't you see I'm in the middle of something?"

"Aww, Barty, don't be like that. C'mon, threatenin' women and kiddies with all this muscle? Hey, sister, kid—no need to freeze up like that. Here, for starters, have some tea. Heeey! Get us some tea!"

So the man's name was Cal. When he started calling for tea, the other man who'd entered the room with him bowed respectfully.

Oh!

Rail hadn't seen his face, so he apparently hadn't recognized him as the sugar-cube man who'd come to kidnap them the previous evening. The sight made Nice more and more confused about the present situation.

What's going on…? These people probably belong to the mafia, but…this building… It's the headquarters of Nebula, isn't it? So who's Cal?

She had the feeling that the chairman of Nebula had a similar name, but she shook her head. *It couldn't be him.*

Indifferent to Nice's confusion, Cal seemed to be having a grand old time as he said, "Well, this is great! Things are gettin' real interesting around here! I sure wasn't expectin' you and your boys to show up, Barty!"

"…Beriam was nagging me. We were pretty startled ourselves when Rubik told us what was going on. After all, the bomber we'd been searching for *incidentally* was here, in the very same building."

"What, Beriam? That greenhorn was here in Chicago until just a couple of days ago, y'know."

Beriam? They can't mean Senator Beriam, can they?

The name-drop only deepened Nice's confusion, as Rail, who was tied up next to her, was desperately wriggling his hands and feet to get the ropes off during this opportunity.

"Oops, that's no good."

Noticing this, Cal hastily ran up to him—

—and in the blink of an eye, untied the ropes that bound his hands and feet.

"Huh…?"

Rail, who'd been released before he knew what was happening, froze at the abruptness of it all. His bomb pouch was only a few yards away, but he forgot to reach for it.

Plopping in the chair beside him, Cal grinned at him and murmured, "Now, then. First, I owe you an apology. Sorry 'bout all that."

“?”

Rail grew even more confused, but Cal kept on saying whatever he wanted to. Barty was gazing quietly out the window, and his bodyguards had temporarily eased up on the intimidation.

“See, one of my people has been causin’ all sorts of trouble for you.”

“? ? ?”

“Well, I’ll make her go apologize later… Whaddaya say? Want to cut that Huey fella loose and come work for my company?”

“…?!”

What did he just say?

Rail was so confused his suture-scarred face went wooden. His mouth was flapping uselessly in a perfect imitation of an oxygen-starved goldfish, but even then, Rail was running through ideas about the other man’s identity.

One of his people…? Who?

If there was anyone who’d caused him trouble lately—although “trouble” didn’t begin to cover it…

Just before Rail’s mind arrived at the answer…



…that very answer walked into the room.

The door opened without a knock, and from behind it appeared…

“President, what’s this ‘business’ you mentioned? I may not look like it, but I am busy, you know? I have so many people to abduct, and…”

…a beautiful, bespectacled woman with a magnificent figure, dressed in a lab coat.

“…”

Five or six researchers followed the bespectacled woman in, and—was it his imagination?—one of them seemed to look at Rail and react before anybody else.

“Huh?”

Then the woman with glasses—Renee—and Rail recognized each other, and…

…the crazy ruckus began all at once.



Somewhere in Chicago

“Found him…,” Ricardo said abruptly.

“Hmm? What’s up, Ricardo?” Christopher glanced at her as he ate his late breakfast.

“Rail. I knew it… He’s inside Nebula headquarters!”

“…”

“He just ran into that group in lab coats again. Tension’s running really high.”

The explanation was so sudden it seemed as if she was picking up radio waves, but Christopher didn’t doubt her.

“What are you going to do, Chris? Are you going to abandon him like last time?”

“Let’s see…” Christopher’s answer was very blasé. However, he stood up, cramming one of his homemade madeleines into his mouth and washing it down with milk. “All I did last time was make him choose. I didn’t abandon him.”

There was still time before they had to meet Sickle and the Poet.

“Besides, I fought Graham to avenge Sickle and Chi, remember?”

“You said that as more of an afterthought, but…you’re right.”

After the unnecessary retort, Ricardo agreed with him, and Christopher went on in his usual tone.

“In that case, I have to get revenge on that group in lab coats for Rail and Frank, too.”

Speaking with no hesitation, Christopher started out of their lodgings, car key in hand.

As she followed him, Ricardo murmured quietly. “Say, Chris? You’ve changed a bit over the past year.”

Christopher caught the comment from behind him, and for a little while, he reflected on who he’d been a year ago.

Then, nodding to acknowledge Ricardo’s point, he laughed.

“That’s probably because of you.”



Somewhere in Chicago

Sickle and the Poet had decided to spend the time before their rendezvous gathering information in town.

Since the explosions had occurred only at Nebula-related facilities, they knew there was some sort of connection between Rail and Nebula.

That said, whether they used the power of the Poet's eyes or Sickle's brute force, charging into the conglomerate's headquarters would have been unacceptably reckless.

It didn't seem as though any members of the party they were meeting would have any pull with Nebula. They were walking through the crowd, feeling completely cornered, when—

—out of the blue, someone tapped Sickle on the shoulder.

"Nn…?"

She didn't sense any murderous intent, but she kept her guard up as she turned around—

—and then she stiffened.

"Hmm?"

Startled by Sickle's sudden tension, the Poet hastily glanced in that direction as well.

And what he saw there was…



Somewhere in Chicago An abandoned factory

Nice and the others were at Nebula headquarters.

The information had come like a bolt from the blue.

Graham's henchman Shaft had said he'd found a Russo Family survivor in town and learned about it from him.

"Yeah… Sounds like that group in lab coats brought them the wanted poster. From what I hear, they were from the pharmaceutical R & D,

in Nebula's basement. So if you go there, you should be able to find out about that Rail kid, at least!"

A stir had run through Jacuzzi's group at the news, and they'd decided to go check it out immediately. However…

…although he was the only one, Graham had looked as though something had caught in his throat.

After Jacuzzi and the others had raced off for Nebula headquarters, Graham's group left the abandoned factory as well.

"…"

"What's the matter, Mr. Graham? You're oddly subdued. This never happens. It's creepy."

At Shaft's reckless remark, Graham glanced at him.

"Let me…tell a story that's just for you," he murmured, smacking his wrench.

His voice was so low that only Shaft, who was walking beside him, could hear it.

"My story, by me, just for you, Shaft. A closed story. You don't need to tell it to the other guys, and it wouldn't mean much to the world."

"What, Mr. Graham? Is this the time?"

"Shaft… Listen, pal."

Glaring at his underling's face, Graham spun the wrench with another smack— And muttered in an ominous voice:

"Don't go thinkin' I ain't got eyes."

"…What are you talking about?"

"Take yesterday, for example. When you took us to that bar. Did you think I'd write that off as coincidence?"

"…"

There was a moment of silence.

Shaft opened his mouth to respond, but Graham talked right over him. “Don’t say anything. Right now, rescuing Nice and her friends comes first… They’re probably there at Nebula’s headquarters, yeah?”

“Mr. Graham…”

“I told you, I got eyes.”

Smiling with amusement—Graham lightly thumped Shaft on the back with his enormous wrench.

“And they’re tellin’ me to trust ya. Lucky you.”



Alcatraz Island Recreation yard

There was a sharp pain, followed by a nasty warmth covering his face.

He didn’t even have to check to recognize it as his own blood.

By the time the pain started turning into heat, he felt the liquid dripping from his face begin to squirm.

The drops of blood on his hand were flowing smoothly back to the gashes.

Firo covered the wound with his hand for a little while, staying wary of the wheeling flock of birds until the squirming had stopped completely.

Don’t tell me…

It can’t be. I mean, it’s probably the same logic as that Sham guy, but…

The possibility of taking over the minds of birds *wasn’t even in Szilard’s knowledge*.

When he couldn't feel the blood moving anymore, Firo took his hand away, but for some reason, the pain was still there…

…and he couldn't see out of his left eye.

"…—!"

That little…! It took my eye!

Realizing what had happened, Firo glared up at the sky with his one remaining eye.

"Let's start with a little payback." The woman's voice echoed, seemingly sourceless.

Realizing that one of the circling birds had peeled off from the flock and was rapidly flying away, Firo glared at it.

He got the feeling that the falcon was holding a marbled red and white *something* in its talons, but he couldn't focus well with just one eye, and there was no way for him to tell what it was for certain.

That said, he was still positive.

It was his own left eye.

He gritted his teeth, just as he glimpsed a shadow in motion out of the corner of his right eye.

Hastily, he jumped back—and immediately afterward, a nearly twenty-inch something punched through the space where his head had just been.

Swooping up just before it hit the ground, it sketched a beautiful arc back into the sky.

That thing's fast…!

They say that when falcons target prey, their flight speeds can exceed a hundred and twenty miles per hour.

It had probably slowed down before its talons reached Firo to keep from crashing into the ground, but even so, its speed was more than fast enough to count as an attack with lethal intent.

Firo was getting a bad feeling about this, so instead of staying where he was, he leaped to the side to keep moving.

The next instant, a rapid succession of several shapes again streaked right through the spot where he'd been.

He almost thought he could hear a whistling sound as they sliced through the air.

Panicking a little, he broke into a run, but a new shadow dropped into a steep dive as if it was trying to intercept him. It sank its talons squarely into Firo's shoulder—and used the momentum as it swooped away to tear out the whole chunk.

"Ghk…" Stifling a scream in his throat, he rolled to the side, then got to his feet with the recreation yard wall at his back.

He might be immortal, but he couldn't do much if his flesh was stripped away. In that last attack, the meat seemed to have slipped out of the bird's talons, but if they kept gouging chunks out of him and carrying them off, he'd eventually be an unconscious, skeletal corpse.

Not good…

The effect of losing one eye was worse than he'd imagined.

It wasn't just that his depth perception was gone. Now that he'd completely lost half his field of vision, would he be able to keep avoiding the plunging, slashing malice coming at him from nearly every direction?

And although the intermittent jolts of pain were gradually subsiding—they were making it impossible to calm down and think.

I'd rather stand in a circle of military-grade machine guns a million times over, dammit.

Firo was under attack from all sorts of fears, but even so, he didn't scream.

I'm probably… Yeah, I am.

Admit it, Firo. Right now, you're scared as hell.

But…if I can just swallow it down…I can get past it.

He wanted to scream. He wanted to run.

His instincts were telling him to, but Firo separated those emotions from his logical mind—and managed to keep his cool as he muttered at the sky, "Hey. You think we could maybe just…call ourselves even now?"

The woman's voice echoed down over him, as if the flock of birds was an enormous speaker.

"…'Call it even'?"

The next moment, passionate rage filled the woman's sultry voice.

"Don't be stupid!"

"…"

"Call it even? *Even*, you said?! You're disgusting! There's no such thing when it comes to you and Father! Even if I gouged out both your eyes and dug your heart out of your chest and stripped off all your skin, it wouldn't be worth Father's eye! Not even a single strand of his hair! You shouldn't exist—you shouldn't even get to be nothing! You should be less than nothing, and I won't be satisfied until your existence is as negative as it can get!"

"…You sound like a crazy white supremacist who just wants to deck a black guy, and your logic's even worse."

As he responded to her, Firo was keeping an eye on his surroundings.

The other inmates seemed to have noticed that the flock of birds was acting strange quite a while ago. Not only that, but some of the falcons were actually attacking the other cons as well, almost trying to herd them into the prison.

Panicking, the inmates gave up their free time, scrambling to evacuate into the building.

A few of the prisoners gamely beat back the birds, but the guards near the entrance pressed them to hurry up and get to shelter, and they disappeared through the doors.

And yet, for some reason, the guards in the recreation yard seemed to be ignoring Firo.

It was likely that the handful of officers he could see from here were all Sham.

He didn't know whether the guy had discussed it with the woman's voice—and the mind behind it, which probably belonged to the little girl Ladd had dragged in a few days ago—but either way, Sham wasn't going to save him.

Not that Firo had ever expected a shred of help from him.

"Waaaaaaugh! What the hell?! What's with these things?!"

Just then, Firo heard a familiar voice screaming, and a shape tumbled up to the wall beside him.

It was Dragon. His tattooed arms were bloodied, and faking a groan, he whispered in Firo's ear.

"Leeza doesn't know this body is Sham's, see."

"…"

"Help me out, a'ight? Act like I'm just a hitman."

What is this, a comedy sketch?

Firo was exasperated, but he understood what Sham was saying.

When he looked over, he saw a concentrated attack on the large black man and the little white one in the distance. Unlike the other prisoners, the attacks seemed to be driving them away from the building.

The plan was probably to get rid of everyone who'd been in that room.

How's Ladd doing?

He looked around cautiously, staying wary of the airborne birds, but the violent, fiendish man was nowhere to be seen. Firo hadn't seen him earlier, either; it was likely he hadn't been in the yard to begin with.

Okay, what do I do? …It looks like they're not dumb enough to dive into the wall, at least.

The top of the wall was fitted with barbed wire to deter escape attempts, and the top of the wire section slanted inward over the yard. This way, he could block sharp dives from above and the sides, and if they flew straight at him to avoid the barbed wire, they'd crash into the wall.

That should buy him some time. Firo felt just a little relieved, but—

"…You wish," one of the falcons taunted darkly.

"Wh-what's that?! A dame's voice?!"

Bewildered, Dragon looked around, but to Firo—who knew what was going on—the act was incredibly obvious.

Naturally, he couldn't point that out—and he wasn't given the time to try. As Leeza had said, Firo was becoming keenly aware how naïve his hope had been.

Hey, c'mon, you've gotta be kidding.

Several of the falcons were circling at great speed, high in the air, holding something in their talons.

By the time he realized that the objects were sharp, gleaming, ring-shaped blades, it was too late.

Firo flung his arms into a cross over his face just before the silver chakrams plunged into them.



Nebula headquarters The corridor outside a conference room

"…Um, Vice President… What's going on?"

"Do not be inarticulate when you ask your questions. It telegraphs your anxiety to the other party."

"Well, I *am* anxious! I really have no idea what's happening!" Carol shrieked quietly, hiding in the shadow of a pillar. Her eyes were tearing up.

For his part, Gustav was standing with dignity, examining a painting that hung in the corridor.

"Hmm. This is another Strassburg. There is the sculpture outside the front entrance as well; they seem quite fond of him."

"Please don't change the subject! A-anyway! Why did the chairman go into the room with the mafia bigwigs? And why did Miss Renee go in after them?!"

As she'd watched the situation play out over the past few minutes, Carol had done nothing but gape, and the combination of intimidation and confusion had generated an anxiety that felt ready to explode.

However, even though the vice president had seen the exact same events, he responded with perfect composure.

“For the most part, I can offer a conjecture. Miss Renee had no connection with the Runorata Family. It’s likely she intends to establish one, or perhaps she has started some sort of trouble which she now intends to resolve.”

“Huh… Wh-why would Miss Renee…?” Carol couldn’t even imagine a connection between the Runorata Family and the blithe woman she’d spoken to in the hall the other day, but she gave it a little thought and then ventured, “D-don’t tell me she’s manufacturing drugs…?”

“One thousand, two hundred and ninety-seven points. A decent line of thinking, but the Runoratas already have a first-rate compounder.”

“Then why…?”

“Hmm. It would take rather a long time to explain. However, I expect I should tell you before we lunch with Mr. Bartolo,” he said as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Carol blanched. “Um… That lunch… You mean…I’m going, too?”

“I shall request that they include you.”

“Why?! You don’t have to request that, really! I’ll skip lunch today!”

“? I’m certain I informed you that one of the objectives of our journey was to introduce you to our customers.”

At the vice president’s calm reply, the girl’s hands shook, gripping the camera tightly, and then—

—the trembling stopped as the sound of gunshots echoed through the spacious floor.

And providing the harmony to their ensemble was the blast of a violent explosion.



A few minutes earlier The conference room

The encounter had been completely unexpected for both parties, and time froze for both Rail and the white-coat-clad researchers.

After a short silence…

…oblivious to the mood around her, the woman at the center of the group in lab coats murmured carefreely.

“Hmmmmm? Um… Why are you here, Rail?” she asked with bewilderment in her eyes.

Nice frowned as if she were wondering who the woman was. Chairman Cal beamed, and the mafiosi stayed silent, their expressions unchanged.

…And Rail began moving on reflex.

I’ll blow her away.

Someone on his list of people to destroy had appeared, someone who outranked even his own world, and Rail leaped out of his chair without a thought for the consequences and reached for the pouch that sat on the table.

If nobody else, at least her, her, her…!

Ordinarily, the mafia bodyguards would have restrained Rail, putting an end to the matter before his hand got there.

However, one white-coat-clad man had pulled a handgun from inside his coat and pointed it at Rail, and this changed destiny in a big way.

“Don’t move.”

The instant the man in the lab coat drew his piece, another was pressed to his temple. One of the mafia guards had spotted the sudden introduction of a weapon and reacted with astounding speed.

For a brief moment, the attention of the other bodyguards shifted to the man who'd pulled his gun.

And so…he made it.

He got there.

Rail slid his right hand into the pouch's mouth—and one of the guards tried to stop him.

Except the man in the lab coat got in the way. Despite the order not to move, he fired.

The moment his finger twitched, the mafioso plugged him in the temple—but his finger kept going, and squeezed down on the trigger.

The shot to his head had thrown off his aim, and the slug went past the tip of Rail's nose, grazing the arm of the guard who was trying to hold the bag down.

"…!"

The bullet tore open his skin, and on reflex, he jerked back slightly.

Seizing his chance, Rail quickly pulled out a grenade, yanked the pin, and hurled it at the group in lab coats all in one smooth motion.

However, he'd apparently thrown it too hard. The bomb went right through the white-coat-clad group…

…and when it had rolled all the way into the hall, a loud roar echoed through the Nebula building.



The corridor

"Yeeep?!"

At the sudden explosion farther down the hall, Carol rolled, shielding her camera.

As the hot wind reached them, Gustav grabbed Carol's collar and dragged her behind a pillar.

Just a few seconds later, after the wave of heat had swept past them…the girl slowly poked her head out from behind the pillar, and tried to see through her tears what was happening.

"Wha…? What's g—? What the heck is going on here?!"

As Carol screamed, she saw a couple of figures running through the cloud of smoke.

Even at a distance, she could spot the suture scars on the small one's face—

—and she knew who it was at a glance.

"…Rail?!"



In a certain guest room

"What was that…?"

Hearing the gunshots and explosion in the building, a man wearing a suit got up from his chair.

Reaching into his jacket, he hastily started out of the room.

"'Scuse me," he called toward the corner. "I'm stepping out for a bit, but don't even think about running away. Not that you could, I guess."

"Mmmmm! Mmmmm!"

The man was looking at Miria, who was gagged and bound hand and foot.

"Y'know, most people get scared if you wave a gun at 'em…"

The threat apparently hadn't been enough to make her settle down, and the state she'd ended up in was like something out of a classic comedy. The Nebula men hadn't really planned on shooting, but they hadn't expected her to kick up that much of a fuss. The guard grumbled. But then several more gunshots rang out, and he dashed out in a mild panic.

The moment the door opened, another volley of shots sounded, so he booked it down the hall.

From the corner of the room, Miria couldn't see what was happening at the entrance, but she heard the guard leave without locking the door. "Iyaag…" she moaned, then started twisting and struggling to get the ropes off no matter what it took.

She knocked over shelves and chairs and more in the process, but the noise was drowned out by more gunshots, and the guard who'd left the room didn't hear.

Instead, the din carried right into the room next door.



In a certain guest room

Even as she listened to the distant explosions and gunshots, Lua, who'd been left in a room by herself, was strangely calm.

Maybe it was because she'd seen death right up close many times, but she wasn't particularly frightened. In the midst of the echoing reports, she was remembering the incident on the Flying Pussyfoot.

Just when it seemed as though that red monster would kill her, Ladd Russo had jumped off the train to save her.

As she remembered her beloved, who had kept promising he'd kill her even after the incident, the shadow of a gentle smile appeared on Lua's wan face.

It was an odd expression to see amid all the gunshots. Before long, though, it turned dubious.

She'd heard a heavy *thud*, as though something had fallen over.

The sound had clearly come to her through the wall, and its source seemed to be somewhere away from the roar of the gunshots and explosions—in other words, in a room very close by.

"…?"

When she put her ear to the wall, she heard the sound of some sort of struggle, and something like a moaning voice.

Maybe someone's sick and in pain.

Seeming to decide that this was important, Lua fearlessly stepped out of the room, then knocked on the neighboring door that led to the apparent source of the noise.

However, there was no response. After a little hesitation, she slowly reached for the knob.

It didn't seem to be locked, and the door opened so easily it was almost disappointing. Then, immediately, Lua heard groans and the sound of some sort of scuffle.

Quietly, she took a step into the suite, peering into a second room at its back.

When she did, she saw a woman in a red dress, tied hand and foot, moaning in her desperate struggle to undo the ropes that bound her.



Ten minutes later In front of the Nebula headquarters building

"All right… We're all here. Great. What do we do now?"

The great building was so grandiose it seemed nearly painted over with the word, and in front of it stood a group of young people who were anything but.

It was impossible to imagine they were gainfully employed, and they were too young to be a group of laid-off workers holding a demonstration.

In the center of this pack of delinquents, a tattooed young man—Jacuzzi—spoke to Graham, who was spinning his wrench with great pomp and circumstance beside him.

“Listen, Graham? I-is there any way to find out what it’s like in there?”

The group had only just assembled, and they didn’t know about the ruckus inside. At the moment, they were trying to figure out how to get in. It was about time for Isaac to arrive at the station. For the moment, they’d sent Nick and Jack to meet him, but they had to rescue Miria, Nice, and that scarred kid before they met up again, no matter what.

Swearing he would do just that in his heart, Jacuzzi watched for Graham’s response, but…

“…I don’t have a brilliant idea, but here’s a hint. Let me tell you a story that’s a hint.”

The only people with Graham were Shaft, who was behind him, and a few underlings. He gazed up at the white skyscraper, beginning to speak with a rapturous expression.

“A long time back, my esteemed brother Ladd marched into this building all on his lonesome, coldcocked all the guards, and got all the way up to the chairman’s office. They say the chairman took a shine to him, and he got off scot-free. It’s a magnificent thing, I tell ya, both my man Ladd’s moxie and the chairman’s big heart… And I hear they still have that same chairman.”

“I—I have a few nits to pick with your story, but, um… What are you getting at?”

“I propose that we take the best of our best, charge all the way up to the chairman’s office, and get him to take a shine to us.”

“Aaaaaaaaah! No, no way, absolutely not!” He grabbed Graham’s collar and shook him back and forth, crying.

The atmosphere around them was the same as ever—until suddenly, things got strangely noisy nearby.

“…?”

For some reason, people were beginning to swarm out of the building at a run.

Come to think of it, on their way over, Jacuzzi had thought he’d heard something like faint gunshots and explosions. But he’d prioritized getting to the Nebula headquarters building, and here they were.

“I wonder what’s going on.”

Just as Jacuzzi sensed a disturbance in the air…

…behind him, he heard the sound of an engine, and a luxury car stopped on the street beside the headquarters.

The individual who climbed out was—

“…The red-eyed bastard, huh?”

Seeing Christopher and Ricardo get out of the car, Graham narrowed his eyes behind his bangs.

Uncharacteristically, Ricardo came running up to Jacuzzi’s crew. “Miss Nice and the others are inside that building!”

“Huh…?”

Wondering what the kid was saying all of a sudden, Jacuzzi's eyes swam in confusion. "Y-you're, um…? How do you know they're inside the…?"

"They're on their way from a conference room on the thirtieth floor to the roof, right now! Hurry!"

Looking tense, Ricardo shouted out their location as if he was watching the events play out in real time.

Caught in the kid's momentum, the delinquents looked up at the Nebula building, too, and just then—

—the first gunshots in several minutes echoed from the Chicago sky. If those had come from the upper levels of the building, that meant…

By the time they realized the reason behind the hullabaloo around them, the number of evacuees had grown significantly, and they began picking up comments like "That explosion…" from the crowd.

"Hey, Jacuzzi! This is…" One of the delinquents hastily turned to the group's leader, but Jacuzzi was already gone.

"Huh?!" The only one who thought he was running from the gunshots was Christopher.

Anyone who was even a little bit familiar with Jacuzzi looked in the direction they figured he must have gone, and there he was.

"Nice…!"

His tears flowing and his face a pitiful mess, Jacuzzi was the first one to break into a run toward the building's entrance. Pushing his way upstream through the crowd flowing from the headquarters, Jacuzzi vanished inside.

When they saw this, the gang of delinquents' usual clamor stopped dead, and for just a moment, they shared a grin.

There was no telling who started it. Somebody began grinning, and somebody else muttered “Guess we gotta do this, huh?” and then they began disappearing through the building’s revolving door, one after another.

People were pushing their way in now with just as much force as the people pushing their way out, and the revolving door spun at a dizzying pace.

Left behind, Graham, his underlings, Christopher, and Ricardo looked at one another.

Christopher was the first to break the silence. He dropped a hand lightly onto Ricardo’s head and smiled at Graham.

“Well, let’s call a truce for today… Is that all right?”

“For today, yeah.”

“If there are gunshots, I assume that means there’s danger inside?”

Ricardo answered Christopher without hesitating. “The group in lab coats from yesterday are fighting with some mafia types. The lab coats only have handguns, though.”

“I see. Well then, might as well go get a little payback for Rail and Frank!” Christopher said as if he was about to go for a walk, stretching his back.

Beside him, Graham grinned and twirled his enormous wrench. “All right… I guess I’ll go help Jacuzzi and his pals, and tell a fun story while I’m at it.”

Then he addressed Shaft and the others behind him in his usual way.

“A united front… Former enemies joining forces to confront one giant enemy. I’d say it’s an impressive feat, but should I really just accept the idea? I mean, what I actually want—what I want so terribly, horribly, supremely, ridiculously badly that I can hardly

stand it—is to settle the score with Red-Eyes here! I let my man Ladd have the redhead, so I at least want to finish things with Red-Eyes myself… But shouldn't I prioritize going to help Jacuzzi and the gang over my own feelings and settle the score with my own fate instead? Hey, did I say something right, just now? Did I?"

"Let's just go help already."

As Shaft put in a perfectly natural retort, Christopher cocked his head slightly and asked a question.

"There's something I've been wondering about since yesterday."

"…What? We're heading out."

Graham had already started walking, and Christopher matched his pace as he headed for the building as well. Both were careful not to make eye contact with each other.

"This redheaded fellow you keep mentioning. Is he an extremely self-centered…? Hmm, how should I put it…? Does he seem a bit *cracked*?"

"…Friend of yours?"

"No. Don't know much about him, and I don't care to."

Christopher shook his head, smiling wryly, then spread his arms wide and raised his voice to help himself forget about something.

"All right, let's sing an ode to this marvelous chaos! Chaos is a perfectly natural act that people can engineer themselves! All right, onward we go. ♪ Over the mountain of chaos, lu-la-la-la-la-laaaa. ♪"

Glancing at the red-eyed monster, who was singing merrily, Graham muttered in a voice that was unusually low energy.

"…You've got lousy taste in songs, you know that?"

"Wow, thank you. Now I've got one more reason to fight with you!"

Laughing, Christopher disappeared into the headquarters. Hot on his heels, Ricardo also plunged into the dangerous building.

However, there was one thing.

Just one small sense that something was off.

Right before she headed for the building, Ricardo had looked at Shaft with a complicated expression on her face, but…

…it went unnoticed by anyone who would have felt that this was strange—and then they were inside and out of sight.



Alcatraz Island Recreation yard

"…Enough already."

"My, my. Surrendering? Are you begging for your life? Oh, I'd like to hear that from an immortal."

The sultry voice echoed from the sky, as greasy sweat dripped down Firo's cheeks.

"Unfortunately, begging birds for my life goes against my code. As of right now."

Tugging out the silver ring embedded in his right arm, Firo gave a wry smile that was partly sheer bravado.

Each leg had a silver ring sticking out of it as well. From the front, he looked as if he'd been crucified. They hadn't gone all the way through, of course, but the ring that had bitten into his shin had definitely reached bone.

"…!"

Taking care not to scream, he bent forward, then yanked the silver rings out of both legs at the same time.

"…Ghk!"

A shock of violent pain shot through him. Even his uninjured spine and sides were screaming, and the subsiding ache in his eye flared up again.

And in that moment of vulnerability, yet another ring flew in and sank into his shoulder.

There was no telling how she was using the birds' legs to add spin, but his prison uniform was worthless as armor. It had never been intended to act as anything of the sort, but Firo wished he'd at least worn his coat.

His wounds regenerated quickly, but the chakrams just kept coming.

In an attempt to get in a hit of his own, he lobbed one of the rings at the sky, but he had no practice with them and couldn't throw it well.

"Wh-what's going on?! What the hell this?!"

"Oh, yes, that's right… There's something I want to ask all of you."

"Yeee?!"

Dragon's fear looked contrived, but the bird-voice didn't seem at all suspicious of it. She had the composure of someone who had an overwhelming advantage.

"Who ordered you to bring them Father's eye? They say one of the guards has already returned to the mainland, and they don't know where he's gone. At this point, I have no choice but to ask the four of you."

"I—I know nothing! The guy pretending to be the guard was the boss; we just got our orders from him…"

Yeesh. What a rotten actor.

To Firo, who knew about Sham's situation, this was a total farce.

However, if Leeza was going along with that to get them to spill what they knew, they might be able to get through this by using the torture to buy time.

It was likely that the inmates who'd gone inside were kicking up a ruckus now, and that guards who weren't Sham were on their way to give a report to the higher-ups.

If real guards assembled here, the guard Shams who were currently just standing by would be forced to spring into action, and the woman would have to withdraw.

Thinking this, Firo decided to watch the situation play out, but—

"Okay, then you can *go off and die*."

It was a truly innocent voice.

She'd been speaking with a maturity that matched the sultry timbre, but it had seemed to be gradually growing more and more childish. With her final sentence, the childishness suddenly took over—and a man's low scream echoed from the other side of the recreation yard.

When he looked, he saw the little white man. Like Firo, chakrams had sunk into his arms and legs. Then the big black man's body sprouted multiple silver rings as well, and several more bore down on Dragon.

"Yeek?!"

Dragon managed to dive to the side and avoid them, but he didn't seem to have much physical stamina left.

Mentally, though, he probably wasn't suffering very much.

But still… She's not even going to negotiate?

Firo stared wide-eyed at the flock of falcons. Seeing his expression, Leeza sent her beguiling child's voice down at him.

"Oh? Surprised I ended our talk so easily?"

"…Not really. Isn't your dad gonna get mad at you for being so touchy?"

"Oh, it's fine. I just won't tell him."

"…"

A flock of birds, speaking like a child, but in a sensuous voice.

The deeply disturbing sight gave Firo a chill even as he sarcastically commented, "You sure are focused on us. You must really love your dad."

"Uh-huh. I'm disappointed, though. I wanted to torture that Ladd guy to death, too, since he hit me… But my sister and Vino will take care of him for me, so I'll control myself!"

"Huh?"

Whoa, wait, hold it. Hold on a second.

His friend's name had been coming up in odd ways ever since he set foot on the island, but this time, he really couldn't hide his confusion. True, Ladd had hinted that he knew Claire as well, but why would Leeza know that name? And what did it have to do with killing Ladd?

The sister she mentioned… I guess it really is that Chané doll, huh?

That idiot's not gettin' suckered by his girl, is he?

Firo knew almost nothing about Chané, and for a moment, he worried that a relative of Huey's might be using his childhood friend, but—

Well, he'll probably find a way to deal with it.

And honestly… Right now, my situation is a whole lot dicier than his.

"Besides, I don't have any time left."

"? Whaddaya mean no…time?"

The next instant—the birds swooped dramatically into action.

The flock split in two, forming ranks, and then wheeled in from the left and right to form a circle around the roof of the prison.

And then Firo saw it.

Up on the cold, hard lines of the prison roof stood a small figure.

The little girl dressed in white was familiar to Firo.

“I haven’t met you in this form since…I was asleep, maybe.”

She’s…showing up in person?

The girl on the roof was smiling fearlessly, but her voice still came from somewhere in the flock of falcons.

As Firo glared at her, the girl shook her head with mild disappointment.

“It’s a shame, since we just met…but I have to leave this island now.”

“You what?”

“I just told you. I’m leaving the island,” she replied indifferently.

At that, Firo envisioned a certain situation.

If she was leaving this island—then it was possible that Huey would be breaking out with her.

He didn’t know how they’d do it, but they had several guards on their side. If Sham played innocent and helped them with the jailbreak, they’d probably manage to leave the island without trouble.

…If it happens, does that mean my mission failed?

“So let’s say we finish this at our leisure, after you get out of jail. For now, I’ll just tear chunks of meat from all over your body and let you go. I bet your life’s gonna get a lot harder, but…well, serves you right!”

Leeza’s innocent tone was gradually growing heavier as she threatened him.

And then she continued.

That was all she did.

Up until that instant, at least, she’d held an unquestionable upper hand. Firo had understood that he was at an overwhelming disadvantage.

Sham had even said the exact same thing to him earlier.

However, the muttered words were utterly serious, dripping with genuine murderous intent.

She said something she should never, ever have said.

“You can try to resist, but if you do…*I’ll do the same thing to everyone you love*!”

“…”

The next moment—

—Firo felt his own heart cool down to an astonishing degree.

It was as if a gust of wind had swept through his head, clearing away all the unnecessary haze.

“Hey… Kid.”

His voice was surprisingly quiet. The instant she heard it, an unidentifiable chill ran through Leeza’s heart.

“Wh…? What?”

The aura around the man beneath her gaze was clearly different now.

He wasn't glaring up at her with his one remaining eye, and he wasn't begging for his life. He was just watching her, simply watching with that frigid eye, gleaming darkly, cold enough to freeze her solid.

"When it comes to my personal fights, I think takin' hostages is for scumbags. If I get orders from the top to do it, then I might. In a fight between syndicates, I could do it to cut down on the bloodshed, or even just for the sake of profit. I'm prepared to get my hands dirty then. But in my own fights, I think pulling that crap is rotten and low."

"Oh, come on! It's not like I care what you think of me…"

"But. Listen to me."

Completely ignoring Leeza, Firo went on impassively.

The lack of hesitation in his voice compelled her to understand: What he was saying right now was in all likelihood the immutable truth.

"If you mess with my family, I'll *get as rotten as I have to*."

"…"

Leeza was completely overwhelmed, and for the first time, she realized something.

The emotion she was feeling was fear.

"The moment you lay a finger on them—I'm gonna make a decision."

Firo's face was as blank as a puppet's, and he'd rid his face of emotion so thoroughly it made Leeza wonder whether she was really speaking with a comprehending human being.

Only one impulse was left inside him.

"I'll decide…to bring pain to Huey Laforet."

"…! I—I won't let you do th—"

“If I have to hide in the bottom of an outhouse, I’ll do it. Whatever it takes, I’ll find him. Even if it takes a thousand years, or ten thousand years, I will corner him, and I will make him suffer.”

Firo quietly gazed at his right hand with his remaining eye, and made himself clear in a barely audible voice.

“And then I’ll eat him.”

That was all.

It wasn’t a threat or anything like it. It was just a simple statement. However, it held an unmistakable, terribly pure intent to kill.

“…N-no… You can’t… I-I’ll never…let you do…that.”

“I don’t need your permission. If you drive me to that decision, that will be the end—of everything.”

The conversation had been too brief to count as a negotiation, but Leeza felt an overpowering terror of Firo’s aura.

She absolutely had to get rid of this man.

But… But could she?

If she messed up, if she blew it somehow…

If she didn’t stop him right here, it was likely she’d never manage it, not ever.

Leeza’s soul understood this—and she stopped moving entirely.

Her composed smile had vanished, and she stayed silent for a while, paralyzed.

Next to Firo, Dragon also froze up, unable to speak, as did the other Sham-possessed prisoners and guards.

A mere ten seconds of silence felt like hours.

Just as Leeza couldn’t take it anymore and attempted to speak, something changed in the recreation yard.

The prison door slowly opened, and a figure appeared from inside the building.

“…This is free time, yeah?” The man briefly spoke to one of the petrified guards, then pushed the door open farther as he slowly announced, “…Comin’ out.”

The moment the man stuck his face out all the way, a stir ran through the airborne flock of falcons.

Chuckling deep in his throat, he stepped outside, letting his iron prosthetic arm dangle limply.

He looked around, taking note of the white man and the black man who were groaning near the perimeter; of the flock of birds; of Firo, minus one eye; of the frightened Dragon beside him; and of the girl standing at the edge of the roof.

“I see…”

As he savored the frozen tension, the man—Ladd Russo—plastered a vicious smile across his face, as if to declare his enjoyment of that very chill.

Setting his sights on the girl and the flock of birds, Ladd let his whole body fill with a murderous intent that was—unlike Firo at the moment—cold and boiling all at once. Then he murmured a simple remark.

Smiling and smiling, he said…

“Now, that… That looks like someone worth killing.”



Nebula headquarters The conference room

Although it was superficial, the room held definite evidence of an explosion.

The first explosion had made the white-coat-clad individuals duck and cover, or had blown them away, and right after, Nice—the first to recover from the confusion—had grabbed Rail's hand and raced out of the room.

The group in lab coats had chased after them, guns in hand, and after a short pause, a flustered Renee had followed.

Then the only people in the room were the two old men and the group of shady characters…plus the man in the lab coat who'd been shot through the temple.

"What is the meaning of this?" Bartolo Runorata muttered in a flat voice. The window glass behind him was cracked.

Possibly because some of the panes had been opened for ventilation, the glass had miraculously escaped with no more than cracks, and no one seemed to have collapsed from a lack of oxygen.

The moment Rail had thrown his bomb, the bodyguards had kicked a table into the air, instantly creating a shield to protect Bartolo from the blast wind. As a result, they were unscathed.

That said, a bomb with lethal force had exploded very near him, and yet Bartolo hadn't even turned a hair. The men in his bodyguard detail were looking at him with renewed respect.

Meanwhile, Chairman Cal had also been standing behind the defensive wall and was equally unscathed. "I tell ya, I thought I was a goner," he murmured, smiling.

The question Bartolo had sent at him could have been taken as disapproving.

But Cal just gave an exaggerated wave of his hands and explained.

"Ah, sorry 'bout that. If my employee hadn't pulled his gun there, things would never have gotten this hairy. I'll compensate your boy with the wounded arm for as much as you want. We can't have that

gettin' infected, so you better get yourself down to the infirmary. It's on the first floor; want me to call ahead for you?"

"Answer my question. Never mind me; one false step and I could have lost some very good men."

"…Your men are more important than you are?"

"I have no intention of dying, but in the event that I do, there's no need for me to worry about an heir. But they don't have successors lined up yet."

Bartolo calmly wrote himself off, and Cal responded with laughter.

"Hah-hah! So death don't scare ya no more, huh?"

"…Neither you nor I even need to prepare for death now, and you know it."

"I see, I see. Well, that's enough about that. Really, I am sorry. I didn't see that comin' at all, but I'll make it up to you. Of course, puttin' somebody of your stature in danger won't be cheap, but I'll pay. If my life will cover it, you can shoot me dead right now."

Although he was smiling as he spoke, when he said the last few words, his eyes were serious. Bartolo understood very well that Cal wasn't lying.

He'd known this hedonist for a long time. The man had risen to his current station by gambling, using his own life as the chips, and he'd already run through his seed money. To a man already aware that he'd used up his life and was living on borrowed time—no matter how much extra time he had—it probably wouldn't come as much of a blow.

That said, if Bartolo backed down for free, his own stock would fall.

In this business, letting someone off the hook wasn't taken as a display of magnanimity.

…Even if his life had never actually been in danger during the earlier trouble.

"…Your petty life wouldn't do me any good. Besides, if I killed you, the cover-up would be a nuisance. If you want to prove your sincerity, you're free to do so in our upcoming transaction."

Readjusting his collar, Bartolo headed out of the room.

Near the door, a man was just getting to his feet.

It was the one in the lab coat, the one who'd been shot in the head by the guard.

A whiskered man had been observing him at close range, but he didn't look particularly surprised. As the researcher stood up, unharmed, Bartolo looked at him as well. With no change in expression, he called the whiskered man's name.

"Begg."

In a faltering voice, he answered, "…There's…no…doubt about…it. These…men…are…immor…tals. How…ever, I think…they're…proba…bly the…failed…sort."

"I see."

That was all he said.

The man in the lab coat took one look at the situation around him, then immediately ran out of the room, but nobody went after him.

As if to express his disinterest in him, Bartolo quietly began to walk.

The bodyguards around him also moved to form a defensive wall around him.

"Well then, today is hardly the time for business negotiations. I'll take my leave here."

“What, goin’ already? That kid’s not the only reason you were here, is he?”

“I’d like to distance myself from the building before the police raid it. Besides…”

Surrounded by his impenetrable human wall, the king left the chaos behind him, maintaining his composure to the end.

On his way out, he finished his remark with a wry smile.

“…I have a lunch engagement to keep.”



Nebula headquarters

“Let go…! Lemme gooo!”

As Nice ran through the building with Rail in tow, it was quite possible that the boy’s eyes weren’t registering anything anymore.

“I won’t let you go! …Rgh! They’re coming up from below, too?”

The group in lab coats was behind them, hot on their heels. Before she knew it, new shapes had begun closing in on them from the next floor down.

Most of Nice’s bombs had been confiscated, but she threw a smoke candle she’d hidden in the heel of her shoe, then used that opportunity to hide.

Frankly, she had no ideas about the identities of the group in lab coats or the bespectacled woman Rail had reacted to, and she wasn’t about to hazard a guess.

However, from the way they’d turned their guns on Rail without hesitating, she knew they were really bad news. She’d could tell they were dangerous for sure, in a different way from the mafiosi who’d been in that room.

They were probably only after Rail.

If she left him and ran off, she might make it back to Jacuzzi and the rest of their gang alive.

However, after considering that alternative for just a moment, Nice knew she'd never be able to look Jacuzzi in the face again afterward. She was embarrassed she'd even imagined it.

As Nice kept running with these things on her mind, behind her, Rail said:

"There… There's…something I have to do!"

As he shouted, a terribly calm voice rose in his heart.

Something I have to do? No there isn't.

Save Frank? Blow up that woman with the glasses? Sneer at humans?

Lies. I don't care about any of those things now… Or I shouldn't anyway.

…They don't matter… Right now, to me, even Frank doesn't matter… It's… It's weird… It's weird…

No, I hate this. I hate what I'm becoming…

Little by little, his own mind was falling apart.

Rail was sure of the state he was in, yet he desperately denied it.

This couldn't be real. This version of him wasn't real. This world wasn't real.

Once again, the urge to blow it all up washed over him.

No longer certain of his own mind, Rail remembered the nature Christopher had said he loved.

We're created beings. Unnatural. We shouldn't be here.

The only words that came to mind were negative ones—and then Rail felt a strong wind buffeting him and intense sunlight pouring down on him.

Coming back to himself in an instant, he saw…green trees that reminded him of nature.

Nice and Rail had run around for dear life, and their running had taken them to the very top of the building.

They were in a rooftop garden.



Alcatraz Island

It was an eerie sight.

A little girl standing on the roof, and a kettle of falcons spreading out until they nearly blotted out the sky.

All those eyes were focused on one man.

The fact that a flock of birds in flight was staring at one fixed point was creepy enough, but even worse was that the man at the center of all the attention was—smiling.

He was grinning at the airborne flock of birds as if he was really, truly enjoying himself. As if he was looking at a feast.

“La—…Ladd Russo…”

Memories from a few days ago rose in the girl’s mind.

The bloodthirsty killer who’d struck her with a chain mercilessly, without hesitating.

Leeza had taken over the minds of many women, but even after scanning through everything they knew, she hadn’t seen anything like it.

There was no need for death to affect her, yet she'd never felt such unmistakable fear before.

The man who'd inflicted that fear on her was walking across the recreation yard—currently Leeza's domain—as if he were its king.

D-don't mock me!

That earlier moment, and now this—why did she have to be frightened of anything, especially now?

As far as Leeza was concerned, it was unforgivable. Just as she'd done to Firo and the others a little while ago, she attacked Ladd with the falcons.

Ladd wasn't an immortal. If she dug out one of his eyes, he'd probably quiet down.

And then you can just die.

On that cold thought, one falcon wheeled rapidly.

The raptor became a sharp missile, diving at Ladd's face at ninety miles per hour.

Splutch.

There was the sound of tearing flesh, and a spray of blood scattered around Ladd.

Except—the blood wasn't his, and the falcon that should have soared up gracefully tumbled across the dirt of the recreation yard instead.

When Firo and Dragon looked over…

…they realized that everything above the bird's neck was missing.

"Hey, c'mon… That's my specialty, ain't it?"

Dragon was smiling ironically, even as cold sweat dripped down his cheeks.

Firo also let the ice in his expression thaw slightly as he realized, once again, just how abnormal Ladd was.

The guy hadn't recoiled from the falcon that was diving at his face. Instead, he'd lunged forward, latching on to the bird's head with his teeth.

With reflexes like that, evading would clearly have been easier.

And yet, Ladd had chosen not to dodge safely…

…but to kill one of the falcons.

"These birds… They ain't normal, are they? They don't think death is a possibility. Their thoughts are all soft."

"Erk…"

In a bare instant, a bird with whom she'd shared a mind had been killed.

She hadn't simply been manipulating the bird. That falcon had been a genuine part of her.

Leeza hadn't had time to separate from its mind; she'd felt the bird die, and she realized she was terrified.

"Ah… WAAAAaaaAAaaaaah!"

In an attempt to eradicate that terror, Leeza unleashed multiple chakrams at Ladd, all at once.

If she'd attacked from all sides simultaneously, it would probably have worked, but she was so flustered the chakrams all flew at Ladd from the front.

"…"

Ladd wordlessly lifted a leg high in the air, stomping down the first ring that came at him, and used the momentum to swing his iron left hand around to dexterously repulse the rest of them.

One of the ricochets struck a falcon squarely, and it lost its balance and crashed to the recreation yard.

After pulling off this superhuman feat, Ladd cracked his neck, talking to himself.

“Those were a whole lot slower than that Chané doll’s throwing knives.”

“No… NoooOOooo!” Leeza clutched at her head, staring down at the sight.

Maybe because he’d heard the scream, Ladd looked up at Leeza—and smirked.

“Sure, you’re screamin’, but… Right now, I bet you think you’re safe because you’re all the way up there, don’tcha?”

“…Huh?” Leeza questioned instinctively, unsure what he was saying.

“Say I’m right.”

Muttering his unfair demand, Ladd twisted his whole torso vigorously back—and then, spinning like an enormous machine, slammed his iron left arm into the prison wall.

Part of the wall crumbled, and the inmates inside the building felt enough of a shock that they mistook it for an earthquake.

“Wha…?”

Leeza had been looking down over the edge, not understanding what Ladd had done, and…

…at first, she thought she was having a dizzy spell. By the time she realized that it was a tremor traveling up from below, she’d already been knocked off her feet.

“Eek! …Ah…ah…noooo!”

The next instant, she was plunging headfirst toward the yard.

Time seemed to slow, and in the instant she understood everything that was happening, she saw…

…Ladd, twisting back, preparing to pay out the same punch again.

…To turn her falling body into a red stain on the wall.



Nebula headquarters The rooftop garden

Unusually for skyscrapers of the era, the roof of the Nebula headquarters building was a midair garden, complete with a lawn and potted trees. It wasn't that large, but its built-in pond and walking path made it seem like a small park.

Here, in this moderate climate, caught between the sunlight and the wind that eddied around the buildings—

—one story was concluded.

After running through the uproar, when Jacuzzi finally made it up to the rooftop garden, he saw—a very odd deadlock.

Graham and his delinquent pals hadn't caught up with him yet. He'd been the only one who'd managed to slip into an elevator that went straight to the thirtieth floor, and under the circumstances, it was hard to tell whether that had been good luck or bad.

Still, this was apparently no time to be thinking about all that.

Nice and Rail had been brought to bay in front of the low rooftop railing. The group that was holding them there, handguns raised, were dressed in white lab coats that suggested they were doctors or researchers.

Standing at the head of the group in lab coats was a young, bespectacled woman who seemed completely out of place here.

"Um, we'd like you to hand Rail over to us, if you could."

As four of her subordinates kept their guns trained on the target, Renee called to the girl with the eye patch in a laid-back voice.

“…I can’t give him to anyone who’d just start shooting for no reason.”

At the girl’s answer, Renee put a hand to her mouth as if she were troubled and turned to the subordinate beside her.

“What should we do? I’m not really sure who that girl is, but she seemed to be the chairman’s guest… It wouldn’t be a very good idea to capture, shoot, or kill her without permission, would it?”

“It would probably be a really bad idea.”

“Actually, things just about hit rock bottom when that explosion happened back there.”

“This is really awkward. Nobody wants to get fired, you know.”

Renee was bewildered but completely devoid of anxiety, and the men around her hit her with bad news, one after another.

“Plus, the group in that room back there was definitely mafia, Director.”

“Not only that, Director, but those Russo chumps were nothing compared to these guys.”

“This is bad, Director.”

Confronted with these various worries, Renee only shook her head as if she had no idea what to do. “That sure is a problem… Um… We’ll just think about it after we secure Rail!”

“You ended up right back where you started, Director!” one of her subordinates yelled, right as two more shouts came from behind them.

“Nice!”

“Niiiice!”

When the group in lab coats turned around, keeping a wary eye on Rail, they saw the two doors that connected the roof with the lower floors. Each one had opened to reveal a newcomer.

From one door, a young man with a tattoo on his face had appeared.

From the other, two young women had arrived. One of them was wearing a red dress, and the other was strikingly pale.

Miria had been running around, following the sounds of the explosions, which she assumed were Nice’s or Rail’s. Lua had gone with her for a lack of any better options, and they’d finally located the individuals in question on the roof.

Oh? That girl… Wasn’t she on the train…?

On seeing her distinctive eye patch and glasses—Lua remembered that incident, three years ago…but this didn’t seem to be the time to reminisce about such things.

When Miria saw that the girl was being held at gunpoint by a group in lab coats, she’d involuntarily screamed Nice’s name—

—and at the exact same time, she spotted Jacuzzi yelling from the stairway on the opposite side.

“Hmmmmm? We seem to have acquired more guests.”

This series of intruders bewildered the group in lab coats again.

“What should we do, Director?”

Renee scanned the rooftop, thinking for a little while, then abruptly clapped her hands together, smiled innocently, and offered a disturbing proposal.

“Hmm. Let’s see… As an experiment, let’s try taking that tattooed boy hostage!”

Jacuzzi had been edging closer, closing the distance, and he overheard her.

“Huh…?”

Just as his anxiety reached his expression, one of the guns turned his way.

“…—!”

If they all aimed at me, then at least Nice and Rail could get away, but…!

That thought crossed his mind for just a moment, but reality was not so kind to Jacuzzi and Nice—

—and the next instant, another unkind reality delivered a knockout blow to the group in lab coats.

A small silver disc flew in, scoring a direct hit on the arm of the man who was pointing his gun at Jacuzzi. The man gave a short scream and fumbled the handgun, dropping it.

From behind Jacuzzi, a man with an enormous wrench appeared—and took his stand in front of the tattooed young man, serving as a terribly reassuring wall.

“Let me tell you a sad, sad story…”

“Graham!”

“Well…it’s sad for the group in white… I didn’t have any particular bone to pick with you people. I’d even begun my awakening to human love and started thinkin’ it might be its own kind of fantastic to talk this out, and then what do I see? You turned a weapon designed to take lives! On my! Precious! Sworn brother and sister! And now, I’m gonna pat myself on the back for runnin’ all the way up here from the first floor, and then! I’m gonna convert that fatigue into pain and share it with you; that okay?! Great, we’ll call that a yes!”

At this point, even Graham's bizarre rambling—punctuated by a series of jaunty smacks—seemed incredibly dependable, and it cast a sense of relief over Nice and the others.

However…

…for the boy who stood behind Nice, it had the exact opposite effect.



Aah… It's him.

It's that monster.

What is this? Why is he…? Wasn't he with the group in lab coats?

Did they fight or something? Or…is he going to save me? No, that couldn't be. Then… Why?

The bomber lady, that tattooed guy, and everybody else—are they all friends with that monster in the blue coveralls?

Maybe they were really just being nice to me so they could catch me.

I wonder. It could be, but it also feels like it isn't.

I don't know. I don't understand any of this.

Aarghh, aaaarrrrgghhh, I'm so damn confused*. Aaah, aaaaaaaah, AAaaaaAAAAaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH…*

Inside Rail, the voice that repeatedly urged him to blow it all away was welling up. With it came hatred for the world that had rejected him, and the humans who lived in that world as natural beings.

That's right, that's right, that's right…

By now, the white-coats' conversation, Graham's mutterings, and Jacuzzi's tearful voice were nothing more than static to him. They were just the voices of the immortals he hated and the humans he despised.

Graham and his henchmen stormed onto the roof and jumped the armed group in lab coats.

Jacuzzi was weaving through the gaps between them, heading this way.

But neither of them mattered to Rail anymore.

I'm sick of this. I don't want to hear. I don't want to hear it…

Automatically, the boy's hands reached for the pouch Nice was holding.

If he pulled out a single pin, that first explosion would probably set off all the other bombs inside, blowing away every human and immortal on the roof. Himself included, of course.

Rail knew this. As if to say he couldn't have asked for a better option, he attempted to pull a pin, but then—

"Rail!"

—he heard a voice.

Just before he obliterated his own world, he heard the voice of a girl—a recent addition to his memories of that world.

Through the overwhelming static, he felt as if he'd heard her extremely clearly.

When Rail turned to look that way—there she was, hugging her camera to her chest.

"Carol…" he murmured in a daze, remembering what had happened a few days earlier.

He had the feeling that those moments just before his own world had broken and everything had begun to go mad—were the last time he'd laughed with pleasure.

And the first time he'd enjoyed talking with a human.

The girl had been with him and Frank when they'd eaten hot dogs. She'd smiled at them unguardedly, weird as they were, and when he saw her—Rail decided not to pull that pin.

Instead, he took a bomb from the pouch, then spoke briefly to what might have been a mere hallucination of the girl.

"Thank you."

"Huh…?"

Carol, who'd been searching for Rail all this time, had reached the roof along with the vice president.

However, the moment she called his name, Rail smiled faintly and thanked her in an odd way.

"Because of you, Carol…I think I might have gotten to like humans, just a little."

"Rail…?"

"So—I'll be the only one to go."

That brief memory with Carol.

The one memory Rail had with a human made him resolve to die.

He wasn't afraid of dying. He wasn't frightened of disappearing.

He was scared of pain, nothing else.

But that was already gone, thanks to Huey and his team.

Aah, when you look at it that way, maybe I'm lucky I can't feel the pain.

On that thought—Rail didn't hesitate to act on his internal impulse.

Holding on to the incredibly selfish belief that Chris would save Frank…

…amid the commotion on the roof, Rail gripped the bomb tightly.

Then climbing over a fence that was about as tall as he was…

…with a faint smile, he quietly pulled out the pin.

Was the smile because the sutures pulled at his skin, or had he seen some kind of hope in death?

No one but Rail knew.



Alcatraz Island Recreation yard

When Leeza realized she was falling, it felt as though time had stopped.

Naturally, this was just an illusion, and the ground was steadily rushing toward her.

Though her body would probably never reach it.

She could tell her fate would be Ladd's iron fist through her body on her way down, and an end as a stain on the wall.

Dying was fine.

If this body died here, her mind would still exist in other Hiltons.

But the idea of loss— That was frightening.

She was scared of losing this body, the one that had completely inherited her father's blood; she was scared of losing her flesh, the color of her eyes and skin and hair, her features, her voice, her frame. And most of all, even if it was only temporary, she was terrified of the separation from her father.

As that terror gripped her, the next thing Leeza knew, she was crying.

However, even before her tears reached the ground—

—Ladd's fist lashed out, ruthless and cruel.



And Rail slowly tipped backward…until the next moment, he felt himself falling.

The bomb slipped from his limp hands, starting for the ground a little before he did.

Still, if he fell now—it was likely that they'd burst into a million pieces together partway down.

Plummeting from the building, he sensed certain death inside himself, and…

…as time slowed to a crawl around him, Rail quietly looked up at the sky.

It was so blue, endlessly blue—and overwhelmed by its breathtaking height, he thought:

Now that I've seen this sky, I might have started to like the world, just a little.

Although it's too late now.

And then, Rail—



Several days later According to Salomé Carpenter

It's a truly wretched story.

Rail did a foolish thing.

Even though throwing one's life away solves nothing, he gave himself up to the blast.

You can easily imagine the force of the explosion. While his body wasn't pulverized instantly, it was thrown from the roof by the rapidly expanding air.

Had I been there, I expect he would have been saved. Or at the very least, he would have allowed me to record the results of his life and died a meaningful death.

However, fate was not on our side—the people on the scene were a band of careless delinquents.

They really were a useless lot who thought nothing at all.

And *that* is why I lost Rail!



Turn back the clock to the instant of the explosion.

It wasn't that they—or at least, Jacuzzi Splot—were thinking nothing at all.

What he didn't think about was the consequences. His heart was filled with a single thought.

Just one phrase.

"You'll get hurt!"

Based on that thought alone, his body moved automatically. And that very lack of concern for the consequences was what allowed him to leap into action.

Just as he saw Rail begin to climb over the fence, he threw himself at it as well.

In other words, in an act that really and truly failed to consider what would come next, he lunged at the falling Rail and clung to him—

—and ended up sharing his fate.

Landing on the other side of the railing, Jacuzzi grabbed Rail's arm just as he began to tilt.

"Huh…?"

It was Rail who'd cried out.

He hadn't simply felt as though he was falling slowly. His fall had actually been arrested.

For a moment, Rail thought he saw Christopher grabbing his hand, and his eyes widened— But the young man standing there, his tattooed face warped as if he was about to cry, was nothing like Christopher.

"Wh…? Why?"

The moment that question entered his head, the bomb that had fallen before he did exploded.

The blast reached the roof, a fierce gust of wind assailed Rail and Jacuzzi—and the pressure nearly lifted Jacuzzi off his feet. Little by little, his left hand slipped free of the railing.

I'm falling!

Jacuzzi and Rail reached that conclusion at the exact same time, and immediately afterward—

Nice had leaned halfway over the fence and grabbed Jacuzzi's arm, and she was holding on for dear life.

"Nice!"

"Ghk…"

The girl with the eye patch desperately pulled Jacuzzi's arm toward her, but she was trying to reel in the weight of two people, and the position she was holding put her at a disadvantage.

All three of them might end up falling together.

As if to shake off that premonition, a new shape clambered over the railing.

"Rail! Grab my hand!"

“M-Miria!”

Miria had climbed over the fence without hesitating, and she stretched her arm as far as it would go, trying to catch Rail.

For just a moment, Rail hesitated.

Did he have the right to take that hand?

But the next thing he knew, his hand had reached out on its own.

Rail couldn’t even feel pain, but now that his mind and body had separated completely, his instincts as a living being had naturally chosen the path that would let him survive.

Supported by Miria’s and Jacuzzi’s hands, Rail was gradually drawn upward.

However— The blast had disturbed the air currents, whipping up another strong wind between the buildings.

The gust was more violent than they’d anticipated. Miria’s palms were already sweaty, and when it buffeted her… Just as Jacuzzi’s had done a few moments ago, she felt her fingers gradually beginning to slip.

“Ngh…!”

If Miria fell, there was really no way that Nice could support the weight of three people. There was also no telling whether Rail would be able to support Miria with one hand in the first place. Carol, the vice president, and even Lua came running over, intending to reach out for her, but—

—a lone figure wove its way through them at terrific speed, rushing to Miria.

Just before her fingers came free—Miria whispered the name of her beau.

Believing in a single miracle…

“Isaac…!”

Children of man. This time, your request shall be granted.

As if the blue Chicago sky itself had murmured this…a voice rang out.

“I’m here!”

Then the light shone on a man’s face right in front of Miria.

Ignoring the fact that he’d lose his ten-gallon hat, the man caught Miria’s arm in a firm grip as Nice had done with Jacuzzi, just as she was about to slip off the fence.

“”?!””

When they saw the man, both Jacuzzi and Nice stared, wide-eyed. It might have been an illusion, but they clearly saw something like the light of hope around him.

The next thing Miria knew, big tears were rolling down her cheeks.

What she was feeling from the hand holding on to her arm wasn’t an illusion or a fantasy. It was the steady warmth of the person she loved.

“Isaac… Isaaaaaac!”

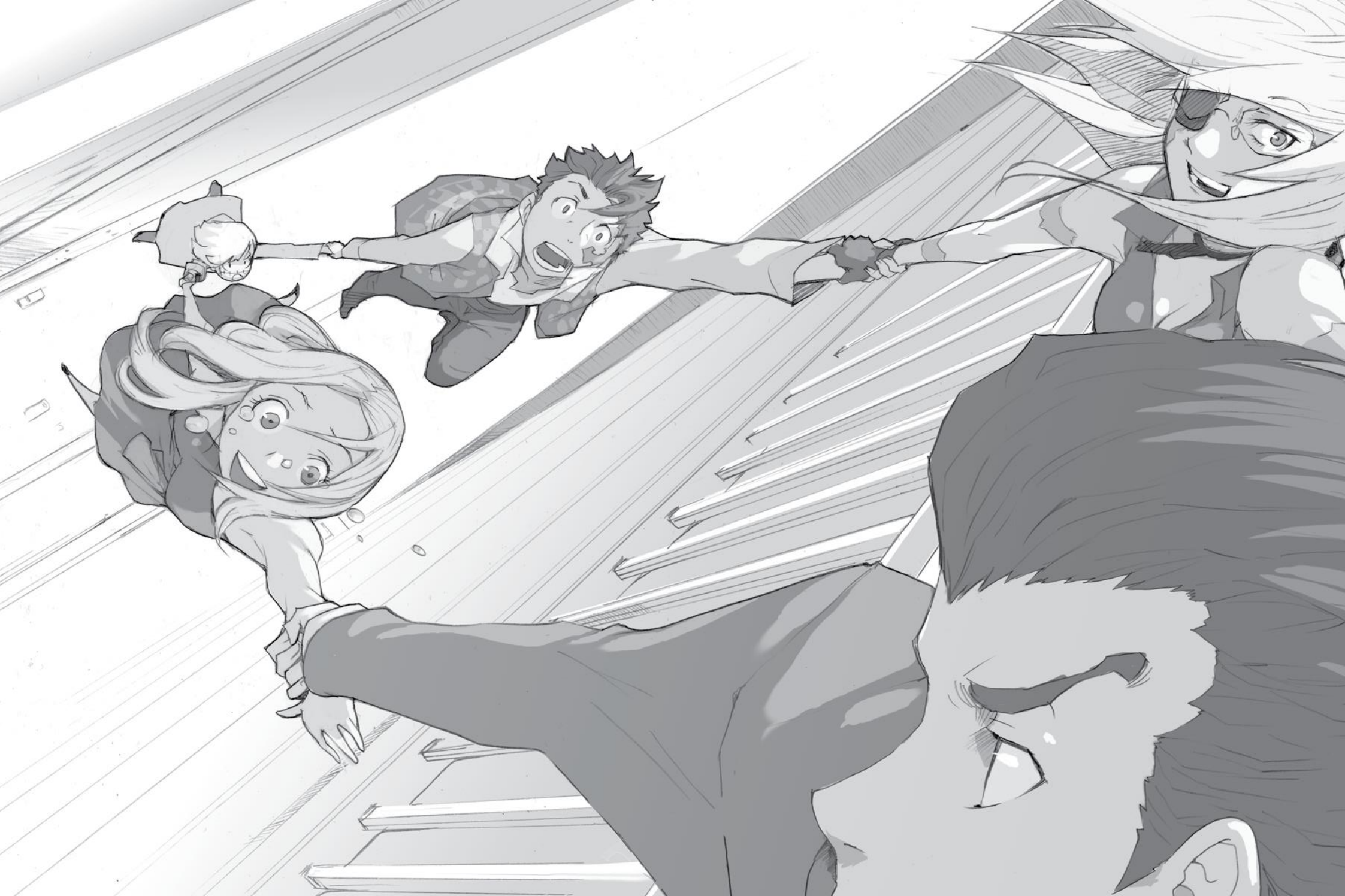
Crying like a child, Miria sent the name echoing across the Chicago sky.

⟺

Alcatraz Island Recreation yard

Frozen with terror, Leeza felt a shock run through her.

However, it was far smaller than what she’d been anticipating…and she noticed it was much lighter than the shock of hitting the ground, let alone turning into a stain on the wall.



"…?"

When she fearfully opened her eyes—

—she saw her hated enemy, the one who had wounded her father.

"Fi… Firo!"

Remembering the malice she'd felt a moment ago, she hastily tried to distance herself from him, but her body wouldn't move how she wanted it to.

And that was when she realized he was holding her in his arms.

"L-let me…"

Let me go, Leeza tried to scream, but abruptly, she sensed that something seemed off. Her eyes went to Firo's body—and she stiffened again.

"What's the big idea, Firo?" muttered a very cross-looking Ladd, who was the source of that feeling. "Listen, I don't care if you're immortal or what…"

His iron prosthetic was dyed red. As he watched the blood that dripped from that hand fall, then begin to wriggle and head back to Firo, he sighed in disbelief.

"Frankly, that's gotta hurt."

Ladd and Leeza's eyes were fixed on Firo's side—or rather, on what had happened to it when he'd caught the falling girl and taken Ladd's iron fist for his efforts.

The flesh was gouged away, muscle and bone alike, in the path where Ladd's fist had punched through, and the cut surfaces were coated with squirming blood that was working to repair the cavity.

Sustaining a wound that would have been lethal for a nonimmortal no matter how you looked at it, Firo had stopped Leeza's fall.

Up until a few seconds ago, the camorrista's eyes had been cold as ice, but now as a greasy sweat broke out on his face, he was smiling with all the bravado he could muster.

"…It's…nothin'."



Chicago Nebula headquarters The rooftop garden

"Isaac… Isaaaaac!"

"Hey, Miria! You okay?! You're not hurt, are you?!"

Miria, who'd been hauled safely back to the inside of the railing, flung herself into Isaac's arms. Big tears were rolling down her face.

It was definitely Isaac himself, and although he couldn't possibly have had any idea what was going on, he was standing there with an oddly triumphant look on his face.

Watching them, Renee was charmed by the unexpected entrance and the couple's embrace. Even then, she still made a heartless remark to her white-coat-clad subordinates.

"Um… I feel bad about doing this during a touching reunion, but…do you think we could shoot everybody except Rail in the legs and call it justifiable self-defense for now?"

"Director, what should we do about the guy running around with the wrench?"

Looking at the wrench-slinging fighter, who was somehow managing to hold his own against three opponents at once, Renee hummed in thought, then seemed to remember.

"Oh, wait. Aren't those people from the Russo Family?"

"Huh? …Oh, now that you mention it, I do think I saw him at the Russo mansion the other day."

On hearing her subordinate's remark, Renee clapped her hands lightly—and said something cruel.

"The fellow with the wrench seems to be the type who cares about his friends, so… If we shoot those friends in the legs, I think he'll listen to what we say and let us kill him right away."

"…Yes, ma'am," the man in the lab coat muttered wearily. He adjusted his grip on his gun and started toward Graham, aiming the muzzle at Shaft's leg, but—

—somebody gripped the hand holding the gun, then wrenched it back.

"Gwagh?!"

The gun's muzzle swiveled right along with its owner's joints, until it was pointing at his face—and then it fired. A spray of blood erupted from the back of the man's head.

"?!"

At the sound of the man's scream and the gunshot, the group in lab coats and everyone else on the roof turned, and…

"Hello."

…there stood a red-eyed vampire, soaking up the sunlight like he just couldn't get enough.

"Chris!"

Through the haze of fatigue around his mind, Rail cried out involuntarily.

"Hiya." Christopher waved at him, then began strolling toward the group in lab coats.

"Oh! Miria! It's the magician who was in New York last year!"

"What?! Then was that a magic trick, too, just now?!"

Isaac, who was the same as ever, and Miria, whose voice was just a little tear-choked, started to get all excited…while Nice and Jacuzzi's expressions tensed slightly.

"Sure took your time, you red-eyed bastard," Graham complained, grinning, and Christopher offered his excuse with a shrug.

"The elevator was crowded."

Laughing at his own dumb joke, Christopher peered down at the guy who'd just died. The blood was squirming, slipping back into the man's head before his very eyes.

"There, Miria, look! It really is a magic trick!"

"Yes, a time-rewinding show!"

Listening to the couple, Christopher smiled wryly, spread his arms wide, and spoke.

"Oh, I'm glad… I'm so glad you people are immortals."

"?"

The men in lab coats looked at one another. Christopher walked toward them, hands still empty.

Renee was wary, but since she didn't know what he was planning to do, she wasn't sure what orders to give.

However—in the end, that momentary vulnerability didn't matter to him at all, whether it was there or not.

"Come one, come all, step right up for Christopher Shaldred's magic show! Today, you're going to see a magnificent display of human regeneration!"

Chris abruptly clapped his hands together, shouted those words—and then nimbly closed the distance between himself and the men in lab coats. He took the hands aiming guns at him and shifted the

muzzles to point at other lab-coat-clad individuals, smoothly as a dance.

A sound like fireworks rang out, and with the smell of gun smoke and sprays of blood, the show began.

Graham joined in, and the completely one-sided routine laid waste to the group in lab coats.

Isaac and Miria squealed and clapped, Jacuzzi and Nice stood petrified in shock…

…and Rail watched this joint performance by Christopher and the monster in the coveralls, his eyes shining.

He didn't even have time to notice that the voice inside him wasn't telling him to "blow it all up" anymore.

In his heart, Rail the homunculus felt a mysterious peace.

Gently rocking, back and forth…



Alcatraz Island

"Hey, whoa, c'mon. Firo, kid… She was trying to kill you. What the hell are you doin' saving her? Are you some kind of masochist?"

Firo was about to pass out from the pain as the gaping hole gradually closed, but he kept it together and answered.

"It's just…how I do things. I don't hit women or kids."

"Ah, I see. Yeah, come to think of it, you said that before."

Chuckling, Ladd raised his right hand high and spoke, his voice ringing clearly across the recreation yard.

"But she was after my life, too. Why should I let her go? What's in it for me? I mean, if your code says you don't hit dolls and kids, then

mine says I can kill anyone, *including* dolls and kids. I love killing more than I love food; what's in it for me if I hold back?"

Ladd had said something preposterous, and Firo hesitated for a while before responding. However, finally, he caved and nodded—and whispered in Ladd's ear, quietly, so that Leeza wouldn't hear.

"Later…I'll tell you *how to kill an immortal*."

"Deal!"

It took Ladd less than half a second to answer. Burying his bloodlust, he thumped Firo on the shoulder with an ironic remark.

"Peter Pan's got it rough, too, don't he? Gotta protect all the little kids."

Firo gave a self-deprecating smile. It was all he could do not to answer the sarcasm with more of the same.

"I think the crocodile should just worry about how to cough up his damn clock."

In high spirits, Ladd kicked Dragon over—and while he was busy with that, Leeza stopped controlling the birds and asked a simple, important question.

"Why…did you…save me?"

"He just said he doesn't hit women or kids," Ladd muttered in exasperation. He never got to land his finishing blow on her, after all.

Leeza, who'd managed to avoid the worst, trembled in Firo's arms.

She did remember the terrible cold and deadly fury she'd felt a short while ago, but she couldn't sense anything like it from Firo now.

She couldn't feel satisfied with what he'd said, and so she said:

"I…I said I was going to kill you… I said I'd kill your friends… And even then, even then…you… Why did you…save me?"



Nebula headquarters The roof

“Why…?”

Next to Isaac and Miria’s joyous reunion…

For a little while, Rail had watched Christopher’s fight, fascinated—but as if he’d remembered something, he suddenly turned to Jacuzzi and asked him a question.

“Huh?”

“You just met me, so why…? You don’t know anything about me yet, but you… How could you risk so much…for me?”



In a prison on the Western coast, the camorrista answered.

“Do ya need a reason? I mean, if a kid falls off a roof, you’d normally save ’em before you even think about it, right?”



At just about the same time—

—in the city by the lake, the crybaby answered.

“Th-there’s no real reason. Before… Before I knew it, I’d just, j-j-j-j-j-jumped—aaaaaaaaaaaaaah, just remembering it is scaring me…”



Nebula headquarters The basement

“Waaaaah, I never expected him to make such a powerful monster. That really is just like Huey.”

As Renee gave a cry of fear that was still somehow laid-back, her hurried footsteps pattered through the Nebula headquarters basement.

Once she'd witnessed Christopher's overwhelming ability in a fight, she'd determined that there was nothing she could do, left the rest to her subordinates, and beat a hasty retreat from the roof.

Most of the third subbasement had been allocated to the pharmaceutical sector's sixth development lab, and it was rather like Renee's stronghold. There was an evacuation route that led aboveground nearby, and she had several available options.

"Still, I have to do something. Should I ask everyone who's left to provide backup? Or would it be better to run… Oh, of course. I can just use Frank as a hostage!"

Murmuring her cruel idea in a lethargic voice, Renee flung open the door to the laboratory—

—and what she saw, she could hardly believe.

"Huh…?"

She stood there, perplexed, as she looked at the laboratory, which had been thoroughly trashed, and the prone researchers on the floor.

Some of them were clearly unconscious, and next to them stood a woman in a green gown.

In front of the few who were technically conscious, though hollow-eyed and unmoving, was a man with a hat pulled down low on his head.

She didn't even need to check to know that they were probably Sickle and the Poet.

However, something else arrested Renee's attention far more than them…



Meanwhile Chicago Nebula headquarters The roof

"By the way, Isaac… What are you doing here?!"

"D-did Nick and Jack bring you here?"

Although they thought it might be gauche of them to interrupt Isaac and Miria, Nice and Jacuzzi were too caught up in the mood and asked in spite of themselves. However, Isaac only cocked his head in bewilderment, his arms still tight around Miria.

"Huh? I didn't run into Nick or Jack."

"What?! Th-then how did you know where…?!"

Don't tell me it was one of love's miracles?!

A dumb idea flashed across Jacuzzi's mind, but Isaac smiled artlessly and gave an extremely simple answer.

"Oh, I met somebody nice on the train…"

"And then we ran smack into *a buddy of mine from prison*, and they brought me here!"



Meanwhile Chicago Nebula headquarters The basement

"Uh, um…? Huh? What? Huh?"

Renee couldn't believe her eyes.

The man who stood between the Poet and Sickle, right there in front of her, smiled and bowed.

"It's been a long time…*Maestra Parmedes*."

To the best of her knowledge, only a few called her by that name.

And this man was most definitely the one she knew.

“Why…? Why are you here, Huey?!”

Huey Laforet.

He was Renee’s old acquaintance, the alchemist and terrorist who was currently supposed to be locked in a special underground cell in Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary.

That said, he wasn’t wearing a prison uniform now. Instead, he was dressed so sharply he could have been mistaken for a politician.

However, despite being immortal, he had bandages wrapped around his face, covering his left eye. The former Felix Walkens must have successfully completed the job she’d asked them to do.

Then why…? Why did he get here before Mr. Felix?!

Late during the night before last, she’d received word that Huey Laforet was still in prison. Even if he’d broken out and immediately boarded a train, he couldn’t possibly have arrived by now.

And yet, here he was. How? An airplane might have made it possible, but how would he have managed to successfully escape all the way to the airport?

As Renee blinked at him in astonishment, Huey chuckled.

“It’s been quite a while since I last saw you so startled, Maestra Parmedes. When we were your students, you reacted like that to Elmer’s pranks nearly every day.”

“…Um… Erm, what did you come here to do?”

“What do you think?”

“Uh… To talk about old times?”

“You haven’t changed, have you, Maestra. If I were Elmer, you might be correct, but…”

Renee tilted her head in confusion, giving a troubled smile, and Huey smirked.

“Yes. If it were Elmer, even if he’d had his eye gouged out…I expect he’d prefer to reminisce.”

“Yes, Elmer is quite easygoing, after all.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha…”

With a somewhat dim-looking smile, Renee remembered the face of her other pupil. Huey quietly smiled back at her, and then—

—still smiling mildly, he slowly raised his right hand and reached out.

The next moment, a gout of flame shot from his fingertips…or so it seemed.

Before she had time to realize it was coming from the tube of a compact flamethrower that ran down Huey’s sleeve, Renee had jumped out of the way, shielding her face with both arms, afraid her skin would burn. But—

“No! …Ah… Eeeeek!”

—the next instant, Huey was right in front of her, pinning her to the wall.

“I look forward to learning what you intend to use my left eye for, Maestra.”

Their position could have been taken as something more risqué…but Huey used that hand to gently remove Renee’s glasses.

“However, in exchange—I would like something of my own to study…”

Softly, Huey ran his index finger over her right eyelid, now defenseless without her lenses.

“Then we’ll call ourselves even.”

“…Just one, all right?” She must have known what was about to happen to her. Renee exhaled deeply in resignation, then smiled faintly and murmured, “…Be gentle with me, please. Don’t make it hurt.”

It was impossible to tell whether the request was deliberate or instinctive. Likewise, Huey’s response might have been an attempt at humor, or just mean-spirited.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have any anesthetic.”

“Eep?! Um, th-there’s anesthetic in the lab over the— Aaaah, n-n-no, Huey, calm down please, don’t be so rough— Ah! …AAAAaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAaaah-ah…! …AaaAAAAAAh-aaaaah-aaaaaaah!”

“Now, then. I’ll be taking Frank back as well.”

Renee had passed out from the pain, so Huey laid her down. Then he took a jar from the lab and tossed the eye he’d just gouged from her into it.

The eyeball immediately tried to return to her body, but before it could, he deftly closed the lid.

Glancing at the unconscious Renee, Huey chuckled softly, then impassively said his good-byes.

“All right, Maestra. You always were running into everything and everyone, so I suspect having one eye is going to make it even worse…

“But do take care of yourself.”



At the same time Alcatraz Island

The white man and the black man were taken to the hospital, while Firo, Ladd, and Dragon were each escorted away by a guard. No matter what was about to befall them, Leeza didn't feel like doing anything to them herself, not even if they came back out into the recreation yard.

Her heart had been shut down, and at this point, there was nothing she could do.

…It's a lie.

It can't be. It can't, it can't, it can't.

It's not true, not true, not true.

No. No.

It has to be a mistake.

He's— Firo's a bad guy. He hurt Father. He's my enemy. The enemy.

He just said he'd kill Father, too. He said he'd eat him!

But, but, but…no, no, this can't be right.

Back when that creep almost killed me, he saved me. Why?

You can't tell me "no reason." There has to be a reason.

It's his fault! It's all his fault for doing something like—like that…!!

Leeza didn't understand the reason behind the impulse inside her. She just stood where she was, dazed.

The guards came up to her. All of them, including the Shams, were shouting. "What's a little girl doing here?!" and "Where did you come from, kid?!" and "What's with the dead bird…?" and "Are you okay?!"

This was all according to plan. She was supposed to insist that she didn't know why she was there, and after she was placed in the

custody of a facility on the mainland, she'd go join Huey with the help of another body.

However, that script had fallen clean out of Leeza's mind.

Her heart was at the mercy of both her complicated emotions, and a single question.

He's not Father—not even close, and yet…

Why him…? Why would I…?

Why did I think he was so cool…?



Ten minutes later Chicago Nebula headquarters The roof

On the roof where that crazy ruckus had played out, Cal Muybridge was smiling cheerfully.

"I tell ya, that's nice, real nice. I never thought I'd be gettin' so much excitement at my age."

"As far as the staff is concerned, it's a thundering nuisance," Rubik muttered apathetically, crunching on a sugar cube.

After Christopher and Graham had knocked out the entire white-coat-clad group, the gang of juvenile delinquents had poured onto the roof. They'd taken the stairs, following Graham, but most of them had run out of steam partway up.

Then with the worst possible timing, a horde of police cars had pulled up in front of the headquarters building—and the delinquents had taken to their heels, scattering every which way.

That said, Ricardo, the last one to arrive, had pointed them toward a back door that was practically unknown even to company employees; consequently, Jacuzzi and the others had all gotten safely out of the building.

Basking in the twilight after the uproar had faded, the chairman of Nebula, who'd taken heavy damage, cackled as he reflected on what had happened.

"Well now, that was a real shindy today. Whaddaya expect is gonna happen next?"

"Whatever does happen…this matter was an all-around nuisance, as far as we're concerned."

"You ain't wrong about that. Still, we managed to get ourselves a pretty good idea of what's goin' on with Huey. That was one stroke of luck. In fact, we maybe came out ahead, all things considered."

"Absurd. Even if he is immortal, what do you enjoy so much about being yanked around by one person?"

At this perfectly sound argument from Rubik, Cal spread both arms wide and loudly declared:

"Pandemonium is just a part of life! Peacetime or war, as long as you've got people, their fates are always gonna get tangled up into one huge mess! *Que sera sera*, ya follow? Sure, he's just one fella, but now that we're involved… now that he's takin' the gloves off and pickin' a fight with us, it's just good form to throw down our chips and hit him with everythin' we've got. After all, it's more fun that way, y'know?"

"If you want to bet lives, limit yourself to your own, sir."

"Well, see, unfortunately… I've been mixed up with Barty and that lil' greenhorn Beriam for ages now… Anyhow, I made this company, so let's go full steam ahead for happiness!"

Rotten hedonist. Why don't they hound him into retirement?

Shaking his head with the expression of a man who just couldn't deal with this right now, Rubik took several more sugar cubes from the jar and began to wolf them down.

Cal, who'd been watching him out of the corner of his eye, gazed longingly at the contents of the jar, then asked a question unbefitting the chairman of a major company.

"…By the by, those sugar cubes sure look tasty. Gimme one, wouldja?"

"Absolutely not."



Somewhere in Chicago

To escape from the police, the gang of delinquents was making a run for the train station.

One of them was carrying Rail, who was a physical wreck.

I'm just…pathetic.

He didn't have time to sit around feeling relieved.

Now that that impulse was gone and he was calm, there was just one thing he had to do.

Even if it meant using this group of delinquents, he had to go save Frank, right away…

As Rail was thinking this, a small voice whispered right in his ear.

"You can relax. Master Huey and the others rescued Frank."

"…!"

The assurance had come from the delinquent who was carrying him on his back, and Rail instantly realized he was a Sham.

"…You really are everywhere, huh." His reply was sarcastic, but the news that Frank was safe dramatically revived his spirits.

Noticing that the energy had returned to his voice, the delinquent—Sham—murmured an ironic retort of his own. “So what now? Will you go back to Master Huey?”

“…”

It was a natural question, and Rail fell to thinking for a little while. He wanted to see Frank, but he thought he could settle for checking on him later, from a distance.

Right now, more than anything, he was itching to deliver a certain announcement to Huey.

“Tell Huey…‘I’m free, shithead.’ Then tell Frank, ‘I’ll come pick you up really soon.’”

“…That’s open rebellion. You really want me to pass that along?” Sham asked, smiling with chagrin, but there was no response from his back.

After he was sure Rail was asleep, Sham kept racing after Jacuzzi and the others, sticking to the same route. He was still wearing that wry smile.

And as Rail nodded off…he spoke to the absent Christopher.

Say, Chris?

I knew it. I couldn’t do it.

No good, honest person pulled me over.

The people who did grab my hand were broken in a different way from you.

They’re the kind who’d throw themselves off a roof for no reason, just to save me, when they’d only just met me… Total basket cases.

Listen, Chris. I’m on the crazy side, too.

And so… So this time—

—I'll go to you and take your hand, Chris.

You may be broken beyond repair, but I swear I'll grab your hand.

Until then…I'll do my best to give living a shot.

I'll do it here, with these completely broken people.

I'll go pick up Frank and Sickle, Chi and Adele and the Poet, too…

Let's scare the hell out of Huey and that rat Leeza, together.

Sounds like fun, doesn't it?

Doesn't it…Chris…?

Even as he fell into dreamland, Rail kept murmuring Christopher's name.

As if blessing his smile, a warm glow filled the sky over Chicago.

Or perhaps the glow was a farewell to the people leaving one city to return to another.

Between the shadows of the skyscrapers, it formed beautiful paths of light.

…For both the good and the bad, impartially…

…paving the way to the next stage for the people and their emotions…



As if hiding from that light, a truck raced out of the Nebula underground parking lot.

The truck was carrying Frank's huge frame. The Poet, Sickle, and several Shams had piled into it and were taking him to a clinic on the outskirts of town.

As he watched the truck go, Huey Laforet spoke to the individual beside him.

“We haven’t seen each other in ages, yet you’ve remained nearly silent this whole time…”

“Hunh. Without…Elmer, you’re…just…a…luna…tic. That’s…why.”

“Those don’t sound like the words of a drug addict…but I don’t deny it.”

“How…did…you…get here…from…the…pri…son?”

“I was merely torn into a few pieces, then had *a flock of my own daughter* carry me.” Snickering at Begg’s question, Huey then addressed another man who stood behind him. “Now then, Mr. Bartolo. I’m terribly honored by your invitation to lunch…but I do wonder what could you could possibly want with a mere immortal like myself. Do you, too, wish for eternal life?”

“I’m not interested in that.” The old man, flanked by his twin bodyguards, was wearing a chilly expression and smoking a cigar. “I only came to get a look at the terrorist young Beriam is obsessed with.”

“Did you? And what impression did I make on the eminent Bartolo of the Eastern seaboard?”

“You’re a kid. A ravenous little rascal.”

The comment couldn’t have been more direct, and Huey responded with pleasure. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It wasn’t intended to compliment or denigrate you. For better or worse, people like you are the movers and shakers of the world,” Bartolo answered impassively. Then, he asked a question of the other man, one who’d lived several times longer than he himself had. “And? What do you plan to do next?”

“Let’s see. It would be difficult to run the experiment in Chicago at this point, so…I suppose I’m planning to meander toward my next destination. But first…”

Giving an impish smile worthy of the other man's evaluation—he bowed respectfully to the mafia boss with the utmost courtesy.

"As promised, allow me to accept your invitation to lunch."

New encounters were born and perished out of reach of the sunlight.

They, too, created paths through the darkness.

Paving the way to the next stage for ambitions and insanity…

And so, on this day—

—the poison known as Huey Laforet was quietly released into the spiral of the crazy ruckus.

Even Huey couldn't know what influence that poison would have…

Quietly, the spiral spun ever on.

EPILOGUE

SOMETIMES, THEY GO HOME



EPILOGUE: SOMETIMES, THEY GO HOME

Afternoon of that same day Alcatraz Island

"Well, ain't that a kick in the head. Seriously…"

As promised, Firo had told Ladd how to kill an immortal—but Ladd felt vaguely tricked.

He hadn't actually been tricked, of course. He'd sensed that Firo probably wasn't lying, and he doubted the guy was low enough to fib at a time like this.

"If you wanna kill an immortal, another immortal just has to put their right hand on the guy's head and think 'I want to eat.'"

It was an incredibly simple answer. If they could be killed that easily, no wonder Firo was always on his guard…particularly when there was another immortal like Huey right there with him.

However—in order to kill an immortal that way, you had to become an immortal yourself?

Not only that, but the other guy's memories and experience lived on inside you afterward?

"Can you really say you killed 'em, then? If your memories and experience end up in somebody else, that means you keep living inside that person, don't it?"

Not only was this a question that probably didn't have an answer, for Ladd, there was an even bigger problem.

"Are you telling me—*me*—to become an immortal? Someone who's about as far as you can get from death?"

When people lived without being aware of death, it made Ladd want to kill them. No way in hell would he become one of them himself.

In the end, he was out of options, and he kept gazing up at the cramped ceiling of his cell and thinking.

What if both Lua and I became immortals together…?

And then, even if it took tens of billions of years, what if I slaughtered all the other humans and immortals…and then ate Lua?

Ah, that's no good. Firo's my pal, so I can't kill him.

Thinking something oddly fastidious, he went on to imagine things that didn't seem so friendly, such as *What if somebody else ate Firo…?*

In the end, he didn't come up with an answer…and the bloodthirsty killer, most of whose crimes hadn't seen the light of day, decided to spend the little remaining time of his sentence as a model prisoner.

For now, I'll hurry and blow this joint, then talk it over with my baby Lua.

The guard—Sham, whatever his name was—had told him, "I won't mess with Lua again," for some reason.

He didn't believe him 100 percent, but either way, he figured this was more practical than attempting a jailbreak.

It wasn't that he thought crushing out was impossible.

However, when he did it, he might have to kill a few of the rifle-toting guards.

The guards on this island were risking their lives in the course of their duties, and Ladd liked them for it. He even showed them a kind of respect.

I can't kill guys like them.

Aah, I want to hurry up and get out of here and massacre some soft fellas.

Relaxing into his tremendously warped conviction, Ladd gazed at his tightly clenched fist and smiled.

As he did, that fist seemed to smell of new blood.



Afternoon of the same day Chicago The Gansluck Hotel

“Hmm. That was quite palatable. As measured by my personal standards, my degree of satisfaction was in the top seven percent.”

“…I’m impressed you could just sit there and eat in an atmosphere like that…,” Carol murmured, looking rather gaunt.

The vice president sent her a cool look. “You are unable to handle the mafia, industrialists, and politicians. With whom *can* you interact without feeling nervous?”

The two of them were relaxing in the lobby of the hotel, enjoying a few brief moments of peace and quiet.

They’d reserved train tickets for the day after tomorrow. When the vice president had contacted the president, he’d instructed them to investigate the situation in Chicago for a while before returning home, and so it had been decided that he and Carol would spend a few additional days there.

After their lunch engagement with Bartolo, the information brokers had emerged from a private room at a high-class restaurant and walked back to this hotel along streets that were still busy with police cars.

Carol had been too nervous to eat a single bite, and once they were in the lobby, she looked positively starved and wouldn’t stop complaining.

“How can you just go up and talk to absolutely anyone like that, Vice President? That’s not normal.”

“In that case, who could you talk to?”

The vice president’s words made Carol hesitate a little. Then, her face suddenly brightened, and she firmly declared, “Th-there was that one man. The one near the end of the table, with the bandages where he hurt his eye… I’m sure I could talk to him, even one-on-one!”

“…”

“He looked really swell. Those bandages made him so dark and mysterious… Easy on the eyes, you know?”

Carol’s opinion made her sound like a young woman with a wide yet shallow knowledge of sensual matters, and Gustav, who knew who the bandaged individual actually was, merely narrowed his eyes and held his tongue.

Ignoring the vice president, Carol let her fantasies about the “really swell” man expand to infinity.

“My journalist’s instincts are telling me he’s sure to become a big fish, so I should chase him and get the scoop!”

“…He is the sort of individual who’d attend a mafia luncheon. Are you saying you would ignore the danger?”

“Ngh… B-but he looked so kind, you know?”

“Hmm… Well, your appraisal of him as ‘a big fish’ is accurate, in a way, but…” After gazing at Carol calmly, the vice president shook his head in resignation. “I won’t stop you. Although I imagine your romance will be torrid indeed.”

“My ro…! It’s not romance! I—I mean, yes, he was dashing, so I’d probably have lots of rivals, and I doubt a girl like me would have much of a chance, but—!”

That was not what I meant.

He hesitated, wondering whether he should give her the full rundown on the man with the bandages, but determined that, right now, it was probably best not to make her anxiety any worse.

Having come to that decision, the vice president began to mentally organize information as a form of after-dinner exercise.

"…It seems to me that either Master Sham or Miss Hilton worked quite feverishly during this incident…," he murmured to himself with conviction. With a wry smile, he added, "Well, Sham may contact us within the next few days."

Carol didn't hear the vice president's quiet mumbling.

Only the sounds of her rumbling stomach echoed noisily through their surroundings.



Inside Ricardo's mind

Sham might have gained his freedom, in the truest sense, the first time he'd failed to subjugate.

Before then, he'd forced many minds to yield and made them his own. But no matter what sort of knowledge or pasts the individuals under his control had possessed, his perspective couldn't be shaken.

No matter how much power he acquired, he was nothing more than Huey Laforet's tool. He had no way to imagine becoming anything greater, and he never even doubted Huey's instructions.

It seemed to Sham that the change in himself had most likely occurred *then*.

His one mistake. A complete irregularity.

In an attempt to insinuate himself into a certain mafia syndicate, he'd intended to take over the mind of its successor, the boss's grandson.

Even though the boy was still quite young, he'd felt no guilt about stealing his life and his mind.

However—

—the moment he'd merged their minds, just before he was about to take control, he encountered something he'd completely failed to anticipate.

As it turned out, he—or rather, she—wasn't Ricardo Russo at all. Her real name was Lydia Russo, and she was 100 percent female.

This isn't funny. My assigned role is male. Using female bodies is Leeza's role. Wouldn't deviating from that mean betraying Huey?

That thought struck him almost immediately, and he gave up on subjugating that particular mind. It would mean letting his knowledge leak to the outside, but if she got in his way, he could just kill her.

But that was when something else unexpected happened.

Just as he'd ceded the right to her mind—she had also given up her own will.



The Chicago suburbs In the car

"After that, Sham and I began our strange joint life. It's what happened when we both gave up control. I kept my freedom and only shared knowledge with Sham inside my mind."

"I see… Back then, you really didn't care about the world or anything in it, did you?"

"Not so much."

While they drove aimlessly through the suburbs of Chicago, as promised, Ricardo had told Christopher the whole story.

“So what was Sham after anyway?”

“…About that…”



Now that he was sharing his knowledge with someone besides himself—this one little girl—Sham was able to look objectively at someone else’s mind for the first time.

Then he took another good look at the lives and pasts of the people he’d acquired previously, and as a result—one day, quite suddenly, he was inundated with a desperate feeling of unease.

Up until now, he’d lived as Huey Laforet’s tool, and he’d believed it was the natural order of things. Now, for the first time, he had doubts.

In addition, as he took another objective look at the world itself…

…Sham realized just how abnormal Huey was.



“After that, Sham began to break away from this Huey person’s instructions and extend his own network, independently… So he could learn more about the world, you see.”

“Huh. So he doesn’t feel guilty about killing people.”

“No… Sham apparently doesn’t think of taking over a mind as killing. However, recently, he has shown some signs of guilt, and he’s been holding off on expanding further.”

Ricardo explained indifferently, but this conversation and her own thoughts were all an open book to Sham. Thinking that, ordinarily, it wouldn’t have been odd for someone in her situation to go insane, Christopher opted to keep quiet about it and encouraged her to go on.

“So what was this incident all about?”

“…It looks like Sham wants to become a being able to surpass Huey, and then do just that. In extremely blunt terms, he wanted to shut down Huey’s current experiment. I’ll fill you in on the details later, but apparently the experiment could have killed a lot of people…”

“Well, that sounds like fun,” Christopher cackled, and Ricardo shook her head and sighed.

“If Sham’s personality were anything like yours, Rail’s bombs might have blown the whole city sky-high.”

“Does that make you the hero who saved Chicago, then?”

“Cut that out; it’s creepy. Still… I do think it’s ironic. After all, Sham and I started sharing knowledge because I thought I didn’t need to hold on to this world,” Ricardo murmured, lowering her eyes.

Silence fell for a while, and only the purr of the engine filled the car.

Come to think of it, these silences laced with engine noise were something she’d experienced with Christopher many, many times.

As Ricardo gazed out the window, lost in thought, Christopher murmured in his usual tone.

“Do you still think that?”

Ricardo thought for a bit after the abrupt question, then chose the fewest words possible.

“At this point…I may have gotten a little attached,” she mumbled.

Perhaps embarrassed, she kept her face turned toward the window. Christopher burst out laughing in utter delight. “Fantastic! That attachment to your own life is a really natural way of thinking. I’m so glad you changed!”

Christopher was as happy as if this were his own story, and Ricardo put her face even closer to the window. In a voice so quiet it was

nearly drowned out by the engine, she revealed just a little of how she really felt. "…Maybe you're what changed me, Chris."

"Huh? What? I didn't quite catch that; say it again," Christopher asked without missing a beat.

Ricardo shot him a glance out of the corner of her eye. He was smirking in a way that made it patently obvious that he'd heard her, and the sight of it made her even more sullen than usual.

"I thought you had good ears, remember? …Idiot."

"Well, what are you going to do now?"

"For starters, rebuild the Russo Family, maybe."

When they picked up the conversation again, after a silence that was uncomfortable only for Ricardo, this was how it began.

"Wow. Now there's an answer I seriously wasn't expecting."

"For the moment, I'll start being kind to nature and practice singing… Although I'll never be able to fly."

She was echoing a nostalgic conversation, and Christopher smirked a little in spite of himself.

As if to fan the flames of Christopher's excitement, Ricardo smiled slightly and laid out her plans for the future. "According to Sham's knowledge, there's an interesting outfit in New York. I'm thinking of starting by subcontracting to them."

"Huh. Intriguing."

"Will you come with me? You might be able to reunite with Rail and the Poet…and even Graham, you know."

It probably wasn't just a hunch. The words were a solid deduction, based on Sham's knowledge.

After pretending to think for a while, Christopher gave the answer he'd been planning to give all along.

"Certainly. I'll take the liberty of using you for my own peace of mind."

Once he'd pointed the car eastward, Christopher brought up Rail's name again.

"Oh, right. While we're at it, let's make Rail a member of the Russo Family, too."

"If you insist, but…I really don't think I get along with Rail."

"That's not true. Emotionally, I think you're a perfect match."

"On what grounds?"

Ricardo attempted to discount the idea as more of Christopher's nonsense, but Chris shook his head in wonder, then smiled the sort of smile that was unique to mischievous little boys.

"Well, you and Rail have one big thing in common, you know."

"Something in common?"

Ricardo sounded puzzled, and Christopher flashed a mental thumbs-up sign.

Then, with the expression of a cad revealing the secrets of another's magic trick:

"Ah… So you really hadn't noticed?"



The transcontinental railroad On a New York–bound train

"And so then I just let him have it. 'Hang it all,' I said!"

"Isaac, that's amaaazing!"

“I think I heard that story a few years ago…” Jacuzzi pointed out, but Isaac just puffed out his chest.

“You bet I’ve told it before!”

“Uh-huh, he’s got an amazing memory!”

“Wha—? Huh?”

In the third-class compartment, as they *fled* toward New York, Isaac and Miria were so familiar in their antics it was refreshing.

They hadn’t spent a particularly long time talking about how happy they were to see each other again, and Miria hadn’t blamed Isaac for going off and getting himself arrested. The moment they ran into each other, everything was back as it was before for them.

They really do fit together as perfectly as puzzle pieces.

…Lucky.

As Jacuzzi felt a hint of jealousy toward the pair…

…his eyes went to Nice, who was sitting a little ways away.

“Wow… That’s it? You actually took down a building with that little?”

“Yes, although as a result, I needed to fine-tune the direction of the explosion carefully…”

“Now that you mention it, it would be better to pack the ——— with __ instead of the plumbing…”

Nice and Rail were having a lively conversation about bombs, something Jacuzzi couldn’t follow. Was he imagining it, or was Nice’s smile brighter than it was when she talked with him?

It’s just my imagination. I’m sure it’s my imagination…I think?

As Jacuzzi gazed at Nice with a flustered, clearly anxious expression, his delinquent friends came over, gathered around his seat, and started chattering with the enjoyment of one finding a fun new toy.

“Hey, c’mon… Jacuzzi, buddy. Don’t tell me you’re jealous of that kid.”

“N—… No, I’m not!”

Jacuzzi shook his head hastily, but his friends razzed him the way they always did.

“Did you see that reaction? Right on the money.”

“You look like you’re gonna cry.” “Get over those tears and become a great man.” “Change your tears into pearls.” “Yeah, then give ’em to me.” “Hya-haah!” “Hya-haw.”

“Q-quit, you guys!”

Jacuzzi shook his head, red-faced.

Suddenly noticing, one of his friends frowned.

“…Uh, wait, are you seriously jealous?”

“Ngh, I told you, I’m not…”

“No, I mean… Huh? Didn’t they tell you?”

“?”

It was an odd question, and Jacuzzi and the others looked at him with question marks.

“Well, see, the back-alley doctor said it after he came by and gave Rail that physical.”

Then, the moment they heard his next words—time froze for Jacuzzi and everyone else who had just learned something new.

“Rail’s…a girl.”



In the car

After she heard what Christopher had to say, Ricardo's eyes widened slightly, although her expression was still sullen.

Almost simultaneously, Sham's knowledge confirmed that Rail was indeed female.

However, apparently Sham had only just learned this as well, and the surprise he was failing to hide came through loud and clear.

"…I did not notice that at all."

"Yeah, I bet it's something only Huey and I know. Well, us and Salomé and the rest of the research team that handled the experiments on Rail. Personally, I wanted you to accidentally walk in when she was taking a shower so I could see if she'd scream."

"Pervert."

Suddenly narrowing her eyes, Ricardo glared at her vulgar friend. However, Christopher didn't look the least bit sorry, and he cackled as he stepped on the gas.

"See? The world's still lousy with things you don't know."

"…"

"Which means when you feel like despairing, you might as well wait until you can see a bit farther ahead! I just now realized that myself!"

"I see… Yes, you could be right."

At that point, it seemed as though silence might fall again, but…

…as if she couldn't hold back any longer, Ricardo snorted and dissolved into quiet giggles.

Christopher amplified her chuckle with his own, and the car was filled not with the sound of the engine, but with the pair's cheerful laughter.

The car went east, and the sun went west.

The luxury car and its cargo of mirth raced purposefully toward its next destination.

Next stop: New York, New York!



The transcontinental railroad Third-class car

On the same train as Jacuzzi's group, in another car…

In a rather cramped space, Graham was spinning his smaller wrench.

Not even this guy is oblivious enough to spin that huge wrench in here, Shaft thought, sitting next to him, then spoke as if he'd just remembered.

"Oh, right. I heard about this from somebody…"

"What?"

"That Ricardo kid. Rumor has it he's going to take over as the Russo Family head in New York."

"…"

This was something Ricardo had just decided—but Sham/Shaft talked about it as if he'd known for some time.

On hearing the news, Graham stopped twirling his wrench with a smack, thought for a few moments—and then plastered a fiendish smile across his face.

"Let me tell you a fun, fun story."

"There he goes again…!"

"Yeah, Placido's still missing. Stepping into his shoes anyway seems a little like conspiracy, but would a kid have the balls and the brains for that at his age? I mean, something about young master Ricardo did feel odd; what am I gonna do? What *should* I do…? It's obvious! My brother Ladd's gettin' outta the big house soon, so what I should do

is fix up a place for him to come home to! If our Ricardo turns out to be a drip, I can hijack the Russo Family and hang on to it for Ladd. If he's the real deal, I can just sit tight and let Ladd make the final call. Man, all these possibilities! I see it… I see it now. Everything in the world is made of waves, I can tell ya for sure! Waves of possibility! And if you don't catch 'em in time, you're fated to drown in the waves of the other fellas. Which means we should become Moses and part those raging waters, ain't that right?!"

"Not if I drown under a verbal flood first."

Ignoring Shaft, who'd put in his retort as coldly as ever, Graham began spinning his wrench again—and spoke to the woman who was sitting in the seat in front of him.

"Now you can take it easy and wait for Ladd, too."

"…"

The woman merely smiled. Her face seemed as listless as ever, but—

—her cheeks flushed scarlet, and her vacant eyes were already fixed on something far away.

She just let her thoughts run to her dear, darling fiancé—her bloodthirsty murderer who was coming to kill her.

Carrying those thoughts, the train charged ahead.

Onward, toward New York…

⟺

January 1935 New York Grand Central Station

"…Okay. What now?"

He was back.

A young man with an eye patch over his left eye drew in a huge breath of New York air.

Even though he'd only been gone for two months, everything was a sight for sore eyes.

When Victor had learned of Huey's escape after everything was over, he'd stormed and raged, but he'd released Firo. The report on Sham and Leeza's secret apparently counted as having done his job.

Well, I didn't mention the part about gouging out the guy's left eye… But that's probably okay, right?

The memory of Victor's frustration at being outfoxed by Huey lifted his mood a little as he strode across the station platform.

However, the moment Firo stepped outside the station building, the nostalgia gave way to an apprehension that weighed heavily on his mind.

"…What am I gonna tell them?"

That he'd become Victor's pawn, because they'd all been used against him as hostages? How pathetic could you get? Maybe they'd tell him he had to pay with his life.

If that happens, I wonder who would end up eating me.

He was an immortal, and if they wanted to execute him, they'd have to make somebody eat him; there was no other way. If possible, he thought, he wanted Ennis to be the one who ate him so he could help continue her life—but that was probably wishful thinking.

The society he belonged to wasn't that soft. Firo understood this. He pushed through the nausea-inducing unease and fear, summoned his resolve, and took that first step into town.

Just then, someone called from behind him.

"Firo! Well, if it isn't Firo!"

"Huh?"

He turned around. A girl was standing there, holding a paper sack.

She was probably eighteen or so, and there was still a hint of childish youth about her face. When he saw her, Firo pulled up a memory from a corner of his mind.

“Annie… Right?”

She was one of the waitresses who worked at Alveare, the bar Firo and the rest of the Martillo Family used as their headquarters. If he remembered right, she’d been there for less than six months, but she was a hard worker with a sharp eye, so she’d made a solid mark on his memory.

Oh, great. I run into somebody I know before I even get home?

He was off to a lousy start. Firo gave a tense smile.

For her part, Annie beamed innocently and grasped his hand. “Goodness, where have you been? Everybody was worried about you!”

“Uh, well, I just, um…”

“Oh, that’s right! I have something for you, Firo!”

“Huh? This is sudden.”

Hmm?

That was when Firo got the feeling that something was off.

He could understand why she’d be surprised that he was back—but why hadn’t she mentioned the patch over his left eye?

Is she just being tactful?

For a moment, he thought that might be it… But then the girl took a jar out of the paper sack, and he realized that he’d been wrong.

“Huh…?”

When Firo looked at the thing squirming in the jar, his remaining eye widened—just as the girl opened the lid without a moment's hesitation.

The next moment, a round, red and white object shot out of the jar, flew at Firo—and burrowed under his eye patch.

Something that felt intensely wrong wriggled in the cavity in his face, and then…

…the darkness Firo had lost returned to his left eye.

Unlike the complete void he'd had up till this point, it was the darkness that came from simply closing his eyes.

"…!"

When he hastily removed the eye patch—a painful amount of light poured into his left eye.

With it came a burst of all kinds of thoughts, and Firo instantly focused on the girl in front of him.

"You…"

"Oh, don't get the wrong idea. I didn't steal your waitress's mind; I started working there using a girl I'd stolen several years back."

"It's the same thing, you little— Okay, hold on, first things first: Why did you give my eye back?"

At this perfectly natural question, Annie—who was also Hilton and Leeza—spun to face the other way and spoke, faltering a bit.

"Because…you saved my body before, so…I'm just giving it back."

…Huh? Wha…? What the heck?

Her behavior looked a lot like self-consciousness, but he had no idea what she had to be self-conscious about.

He should have seen that her feelings had undergone some sort of change, but in his mind, her true body was a little kid. Ennis was slow to pick up on delicate signs like that, and similarly, Firo was the type who tended to miss subtleties in the emotions of anyone other than himself.

And before he could notice them, Annie shut those feelings away completely.

She fell silent for a few moments, then turned back to him and murmured in a voice that was a little heavier.

“Besides, I don’t have the time to hold a grudge against you anymore.”

“What?”

“Right now…I’m thinking about how to eliminate a traitor.”

She wasn’t just trying to disguise her earlier awkwardness. As proof—Firo sensed a hatred in her words greater than what she’d turned on him in the prison, and he felt cold sweat trickle down his back.

“What do you mean, ‘traitor’?”

“You’ll know soon. Come on, let’s hurry back to the bar!”

The girl’s Annie mask was already back in place. Firo was confused, but he decided that going home was the only thing he could do right now and left that worry for another time.

Alveare

“Look, everybody! It’s Firo! Firo’s home!”

“Hey, don’t—”

No sooner had they reached the storefront than Annie ran in, shouting.

He didn’t even have time to brace himself.

Would a knife suddenly come flying at him, or would he just be skewered by everyone’s icy glares alone? He imagined a whole host of bleak scenarios, but then…

…when he saw the first figure to come dashing out of the shop—they were blown away.

Everything he imagined, everything he had braced himself for was blown clean from his mind.

“Firo!”

“Ennis…”

She was looking stylish as ever in her women’s suit, and as he gazed at her…

For a little while, Firo opened and shut his mouth uselessly, like a goldfish. Before long, though, he pulled himself together, smiled awkwardly, and said the words he’d most wanted to say.

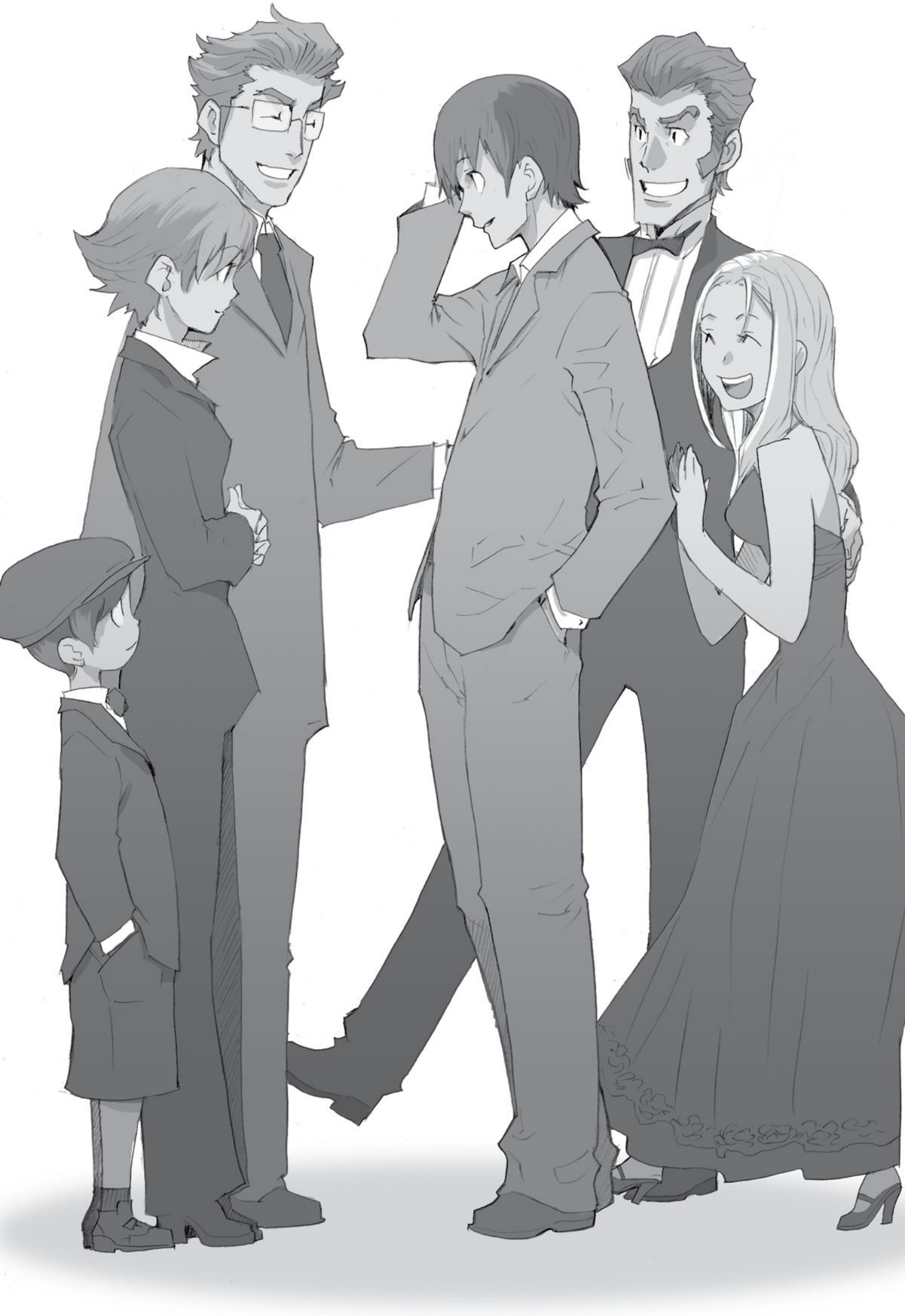
“…I’m back.”

Tearing up a little, Ennis said the words he’d most wanted to hear.

“Welcome home!”

That was all.

To Firo, it was more than enough.



Next, Isaac, Miria, Maiza, and Czes came running out, and as he looked at them, Firo was certain. No matter what hardships might lie ahead…

…for now, in this one moment…

…he was undeniably happy.

And so the players in the crazy ruckus returned home.

Home to the city that was both their beginning and their end.

In order to spin new tales in the hustle and bustle of New York…

Digression: The Police Show Up Late

Turn the clock back two weeks.

“We’re late… He got the jump on us, dammit!”

As he stepped down from a train in Chicago, a bespectacled man who looked like a public servant was fuming.

Victor Talbot, an immortal and Bureau of Investigation executive, had been roundly delayed thanks to Huey’s trap.

“This is as far as he goes, though. Now that I’m here, I won’t let him do a goddamn thing! That Huey louse is gonna be in the pen sobbing his eyes out over how helpless he is, mark my words. Man, would I kinda *love* to see that…”

Jauntily adjusting his glasses, he strode through the station with an excess of vim and vigor.

From his energy, you’d have thought he was gearing up to arrest the whole town.

Incidentally, a mere thirty minutes later, he would receive the report about Huey’s jailbreak and subsequently become an uncomfortably drunk mess sobbing his own eyes out in front of his men—

But that’s another story.



Somewhere in New York

“I see… So there was quite a lot happening in Chicago, hmm?”

“What do you want to do, boss?”

In a dim room whose curtains had been tightly drawn, three figures were conversing with some distance between them.

That said, one of the figures—Nameless, one of the former Felix Walkens—was very nearly silent, and the only ones speaking were the other two: Senator Manfred Beriam and his hired sniper, Spike.

“Want us to head over to Chicago, too?” Spike muttered indifferently, but Beriam immediately shook his head.

“No, I doubt there’s any point in going now.”

“Huh? Uh…”

“I expect Huey planned to use New York as a decoy and run a large-scale experiment in Chicago. However… After that uproar, he may have abandoned the idea.”

Stubbing his cigar into an ashtray, Beriam spoke in a solemn voice.

“We don’t need to forestall them or set traps. No matter what they use, we’ll take the challenge…and crush them. That is all.”

There was no telling what Beriam was looking at. His gaze wandered through space as he murmured, eyes narrowed. It was impossible to determine whether or not he was speaking as a politician.

“…It would be ideal if we could use this to stamp out those ticks in New York.”



The transcontinental railroad A second-class compartment

“Sham… Send a message to everyone. ‘As of now, I am putting a temporary hold on the Chicago experiment.’”

“Understood, Master Huey.”

“Once the new year begins—the experiment will resume.”

As if it had been waiting for his words, the train quietly began to roll. Gazing out the window at the shifting Chicago scenery as if he was

reluctant to part with it, Huey felt his left eye twinge—and smiled softly.

He'd left behind the events behind the prison walls and in the streets beyond; his right eye was already focused exclusively on the next experiment.

In a corner of the moving scenery on the platform, he spotted Victor striding along with squared shoulders, and he murmured the rest with a touch of amusement.

"Under the lights of New York…it should be a grand affair."

Then Huey toyed with a small jar he held in his right hand.

A single eyeball rolled around inside it. It wasn't his own.

Making eye contact with the eyeball he'd acquired in an act of revenge just the other day, Huey spoke to it quietly.

As he addressed the silent eye, he was visualizing the faces of his two children…

"I imagine you'd like to see your daughters from time to time as well…wouldn't you, Maestra Parmedes?"

The train surged into motion.

Bound for New York City, it carried all kinds of human thoughts—dreams, hopes, ambitions…

…and just a touch of poison.


BACCANO!
1934—The End

AFTERWORD

Hello; it's been quite a while. This is Narita.

So here it is: the concluding volume of the 1934 arc.

Not only is this the thickest *Baccano!* volume to date, it's the volume that gave me the most trouble yet (struggling with time and adjusting the number of pages). To make it fit into the current page count, I had to shave away about a hundred and fifty pages' worth of story. I'd like to include those scenes in *1935* instead, but…I wonder how long 1935 is going to end up being. Heh-heh. I'm getting kinda psyched about it! …Through my tears.

Before now, I'd kept my attitude toward the story fresh by alternating writing it with volumes of *DRRR!!!*, *Vamp!*, and the *Etsusa Bridge* series. However, what with the anime this year, *Baccano!* is just about the only story I've been able to work on, which means that I'm not really in my element… The trouble is that since I've been writing *Baccano!* back-to-back, ideas for *DRRR!!!*, *Vamp!*, *5656! – Knights' Strange Night*, and new series are piling up, and the supply of stories and characters is outstripping consumption. I've got close to a hundred characters' worth of *Vamp!* character background details at this point, and could probably fill a volume with them. Although, naturally, I doubt they'd publish that for me!

The *Baccano!* cast has also been increasing at a similar pace up till now.

Members of the anime staff have asked me about specific cast numbers, and I've been getting worried that my novels actually might have more characters than the norm. However, as of the 1934 arc, I think I've introduced about 90 percent of the 1930s characters. Just a little longer and I should be able to shout, "All the players are in place! And as a matter of fact, we're heading into the climax of the 1930s arc!" …Yes indeed!

The only remaining new 1930s characters are the Runorata grandkid, Nader's childhood buddy, and the Croquis clan, so for those of you who are thinking, "I don't think I can remember any more character names!" rest assured.

…Provided I don't think of any new characters before I write *1935* or while I'm working on it anyway.

All of this to say that *Baccano!* is going to keep right on going, so look forward to it!

There's *1705*, which is about a grand adventure Elmer and Huey had as kids.

Also *1710*, in which the pasts of Denkurou and Zankurou, Nile, Victor, and the Avaro brothers are revealed.

As well as *2002*, in which the final boss (?) of the *Baccano!* series finally appears.

And then *1935*. (I'm currently meeting with the editorial department to figure out which ones I'm going to write this year.)

The *DRRR!!!*, *5656!*, and *Vamp!* series haven't been dropped, either (or so I'd like to believe), so hang on until later this year, around the time the weather starts to get cold!

So this has become the year of anime and manga and the crazy ruckus, and I'll be attacking stubbornly with a focus on *Baccano!* The specific airdates are still a secret, but while the anime's being broadcast, I'll be hitting aggressively, and it'll be *Baccano!* go, fight, win, kaboom! (Broken Japanese.)

The fact that I've been able to stay energized even though my writing cycle's different from usual is all thanks to the anime staff and Ginyuu Shijin!

Every time new information about the anime comes in, my heart leaps, and whenever I see a new chapter from Ginyuu Shijin (he was

good to begin with, and he's been getting better at a jaw-dropping rate), I think, *Dammit! I'm not letting him beat me like this!*

As a rule, I check all the anime scripts and the manga roughs very carefully, but with the anime, even if I say, "Whoa… That's awesome! It's fine like this!" the editor and the director say "No, let's make it better" and keep having meetings. With the manga, even if I say, "Dude! I don't even have any comments to make here!" the manga supervisor says, "No, please make it crazier!" and then the finished manuscript ends up being even crazier than the roughs I corrected… B-but the author of the original is saying it's fine the way it is?! Uh-oh: Both the anime and the manga are hell-bent on surpassing the original. I'm in a gloves-off fight with the anime and manga! "G-great, bring it! If you're trying to surpass the original, I'll just aim even higher!" …And so, these days, I keep getting myself even more fired up.

By this month, I think they'll have released information about the anime staff, and some readers will be seeing anime promo footage. Look forward to watching the finished product!

Parenthetically, there are all sorts of *Baccano!*-related projects in the *Dengeki hp* that comes out this month, including an interview with me and Director Omori, so do check that out as well! Don't miss the editor's notes, either!! Enami's supremely magnificent Chané is on the cover, so just look for her!

*And now for the usual thank-yous.

To my supervising editor, Wada (Papio), for whom I'm always, always causing trouble (especially this time, to the point where it really isn't funny anymore). Also to Jasmine the facilitator, Chief Editor Suzuki, and the people of the editorial department. Thank you very much, but more importantly, I'm really sorry!

To the copy editors, for whom I'm always causing trouble by being a slow worker. To the designers, who make my books look good. To the people of the publicity, printing, and marketing departments, and Media Works as a whole.

To my family, friends, and acquaintances, who always take care of me in all sorts of ways, and particularly to everyone in S City.

To Katsumi Enami, who brought fantastic, top-quality color to the world of *Baccano!* even though he was busy.

And to all the readers… Thank you very much!

March 2007

I thought I'd talk about games I like in the afterword for a change, but it would easily go over ten pages, so I'm sticking with my usual style after all.

Ryohgo Narita

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